THE CLOUD ATLAS

David Mitchell

RANDOM HOUSE

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CLOUD ATLAS

A NOVEL

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New York

FOR HANA AND HER GRANDPARENTS

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The Ewing and Zachry chapters were researched with the aid of a travel scholarship from the Society of Authors. Michael King's definitive work on the Moriori, *A Land Apart,* provides a factual account of Chatham Islands history Certain scenes in Robert Fro-bisher's letters owe debts of inspiration to *Delius: As I Knew Him* by Eric Fenby (Icon Books, 1966; originally G. Bell & Sons Ltd., 1936). The character Vyvyan Ayrs quotes Nietzsche more freely than he admits, and the poem read by Hester Van Zandt to Margo Roker is Emerson's "Brahma."

THE PACIFIC JOURNAL OF ADAM EWING

Thursday, 7th November—

Beyond the Indian hamlet, upon a forlorn strand, I happened on a trail of recent footprints. Through rotting kelp, sea cocoa-nuts & bamboo, the tracks led me to their maker, a White man, his trow-zers & Pea-jacket rolled up, sporting a kempt beard & an outsized Beaver, shoveling & sifting the cindery sand with a teaspoon so intently that he noticed me only after I had hailed him from ten yards away. Thus it was, I made the acquaintance of Dr. Henry Goose, surgeon to the London nobility. His nationality was no surprise. If there be any eyrie so desolate, or isle so remote, that one may there resort unchallenged by an Englishman, 'tis not down on any map I ever saw.

Had the doctor misplaced anything on that dismal shore? Could I render assistance? Dr. Goose shook his head, knotted loose his 'kerchief & displayed its contents with clear pride. "Teeth, sir, are the enameled grails of the quest in hand. In days gone by this Arcadian strand was a cannibals' banqueting hall, yes, where the strong engorged themselves on the weak. The teeth, they spat out, as you or I would expel cherry stones. But these base molars, sir, shall be transmuted to gold & how? An artisan of Piccadilly who fashions denture sets for the nobility pays handsomely for human gnashers. Do you know the price a quarter pound will earn, sir?"

I confessed I did not.

"Nor shall I enlighten you, sir, for 'tis a professional secret!" He tapped his nose. "Mr. Ewing, are you acquainted with Marchioness Grace of Mayfair? No? The better for you, for she is a corpse in petticoats. Five years have passed since this harridan besmirched my name, yes, with imputations that resulted in my being blackballed from Society" Dr. Goose looked out to sea. "My peregrinations began in that dark hour."

I expressed sympathy with the doctor's plight.

"I thank you, sir, I thank you, but these ivories"—he shook his 'kerchief—"are my angels of redemption. Permit me to elucidate. The Marchioness wears dental fixtures fashioned by the aforementioned doctor. Next yuletide, just as that scented She-Donkey is addressing her Ambassadors' Ball, I, Henry Goose, yes, *I* shall arise & declare to one & all that our hostess masticates with cannibals' gnashers! Sir Hubert will challenge me, predictably, 'Furnish your evidence,' that boor shall roar, 'or grant me satisfaction!' I shall declare, 'Evidence, Sir Hubert? Why, I gathered your mother's teeth *myself* from the spittoon of the South Pacific! Here, sir, *here* are some of their fellows!' & fling these very teeth into her tortoiseshell soup tureen & that, sir, that will grant me *my* satisfaction! The twittering wits will scald the icy Marchioness in their news sheets & by next season she shall be fortunate to receive an invitation to a Poorhouse Ball!"

In haste, I bade Henry Goose a good day. I fancy he is a Bedlamite.

Friday, 8th November—

In the rude shipyard beneath my window, work progresses on the jibboom, under Mr. Sykes's directorship. Mr. Walker, Ocean Bay's sole taverner, is also its principal timber merchant & he brags of his years as a master shipbuilder in Liverpool. (I am now versed enough in Antipodese etiquette to let such unlikely truths lie.) Mr. Sykes told me an entire week is needed to render the *Prophetess* "Bristol fashion." Seven days holed up in the *Musket* seems a grim sentence, yet I recall the fangs of the banshee tempest & the mariners lost o'erboard & my present misfortune feels less acute.

I met Dr. Goose on the stairs this morning & we took breakfast together. He has lodged at the *Musket* since middle October after voyaging hither on a Brazilian merchantman, *Namorados,* from Fee-jee, where he practiced his arts in a mission. Now the doctor awaits a long-overdue Australian sealer, the *Nellie,* to convey him to Sydney. From the colony he will seek a position aboard a passenger ship for his native London.

My judgment of Dr. Goose was unjust & premature. One must be cynical as Diogenes to prosper in my profession, but cynicism can blind one to subtler virtues. The doctor has his eccentricities & recounts them gladly for a dram of Portuguese *pisco* (never to excess), but I vouchsafe he is the only other gentleman on this latitude east of Sydney & west of Valparaiso. I may even compose for him a letter of introduction for the Partridges in Sydney, for Dr. Goose & dear Fred are of the same cloth.

Poor weather precluding my morning outing, we yarned by the peat fire & the hours sped by like minutes. I spoke at length of Tilda & Jackson & also my fears of "gold fever" in San Francisco. Our conversation then voyaged from my hometown to my recent notarial duties in New South Wales, thence to Gibbon, Malthus & Godwin via Leeches & Locomotives. Attentive conversation is an emollient I lack sorely aboard the *Prophetess* & the doctor is a veritable polymath. Moreover, he possesses a handsome army of scrimshandered chessmen whom we shall keep busy until either the *Prophetess's* departure or the *Nellie's* arrival.

Saturday, 9th November—

Sunrise bright as a silver dollar. Our schooner still looks a woeful picture out in the Bay. An Indian war canoe is being careened on the shore. Henry & I struck out for "Banqueter's Beach" in holy-day mood, blithely saluting the maid who labors for Mr. Walker. The sullen miss was hanging laundry on a shrub & ignored us. She has a tinge of black blood & I fancy her mother is not far removed from the jungle breed.

As we passed below the Indian hamlet, a "humming" aroused our curiosity & we resolved to locate its source. The settlement is circumvallated by a stake fence, so decayed that one may gain ingress at a dozen places. A hairless bitch raised her head, but she was toothless & dying & did not bark. An outer ring of *ponga* huts (fashioned from branches, earthen walls & matted ceilings) groveled in the lees of "grandee" dwellings, wooden structures with carved lintel pieces & rudimentary porches. In the hub of this village, a public flogging was under way. Henry & I were the only two Whites present, but three castes of spectating Indians were demarked. The chieftain occupied his throne, in a feathered cloak, while the tattooed gentry & their womenfolk & children stood in attendance, numbering some thirty in total. The slaves, duskier & sootier than their nut-brown masters & less than half their number, squatted in the mud. Such inbred, bovine torpor! Pockmarked & pustular with *haki-haki,* these wretches watched the punishment, making no response but that bizarre, beelike "hum." Empathy or condemnation, we knew not what the noise signified. The whip master was a Goliath whose physique would daunt any frontier prizefighter. Lizards mighty & small were tattooed over every inch of the savage's musculature:—his pelt would fetch a fine price, though I should not

be the man assigned to relieve him of it for all the pearls of O-hawaii! The piteous prisoner, hoarfrosted with many harsh years, was bound naked to an A-frame. His body shuddered with each excoriating lash, his back was a vellum of bloody runes, but his insensible face bespoke the serenity of a martyr already in the care of the Lord.

I confess, I swooned under each fall of the lash. Then a peculiar thing occurred. The beaten savage raised his slumped head, found *my* eye & shone me a look of uncanny, amicable knowing! As if a theatrical performer saw a long-lost friend in the Royal Box and, undetected by the audience, communicated his recognition. A tattooed "blackfella" approached us & flicked his nephrite dagger to indicate that we were unwelcome. I inquired after the nature of the prisoner's crime. Henry put his arm around me. "Come, Adam, a wise man does not step betwixt the beast & his meat."

Sunday, 10th November—

Mr. Boerhaave sat amidst his cabal of trusted ruffians like Lord Anaconda & his garter snakes. Their Sabbath "celebrations" downstairs had begun ere I had risen. I went in search of shaving water & found the tavern swilling with Tars awaiting their turn with those poor Indian girls whom Walker has ensnared in an impromptu *bordello*. (Rafael was not in the debauchers' number.)

I do not break my Sabbath fast in a whorehouse. Henry's sense of repulsion equaled to my own, so we forfeited breakfast (the maid was doubtless being pressed into alternative service) & set out for the chapel to worship with our fasts unbroken.

We had not gone two hundred yards when, to my consternation, I remembered this journal, lying on the table in my room at the *Musket,* visible to any drunken sailor who might break in. Fearful for its safety (& my own, were Mr. Boerhaave to get his hands on it), I retraced my steps to conceal it more artfully Broad smirks greeted my return & I assumed I was "the devil being spoken of," but I learned the true reason when I opened my door:—to wit, Mr. Boerhaave's ursine buttocks astraddle his Blackamoor Goldilocks in *my* bed *in flagrante delicto!* Did that devil Dutchman apologize? Far from it! He judged *himself* 'the injured party & roared, "Get ye hence, Mr. Quillcock! or by God's B——d, I shall snap your tricksy Yankee nib in two!"

I snatched my diary & clattered downstairs to a *riotocracy* of merriment & ridicule from the White savages there gathered. I remonstrated to Walker that I was paying for a private room & I expected it to remain private even during my absence, but that scoundrel merely offered a one-third discount on "a quarter-hour's gallop on the comeliest filly in my stable!" Disgusted, I retorted that I was a husband & a father! & that I should rather die than abase my dignity & decency with any of his poxed whores! Walker swore to "decorate my eyes" if I called his own dear daughters "whores" again. One toothless garter snake jeered that if possessing a wife & a child was a single virtue, "Why Mr. Ewing, I be ten times more virtuous than you be!" & an unseen hand emptied a tankard of sheog over my person. I withdrew ere the liquid was swapped for a more obdurate missile.

The chapel bell was summoning the God-fearing of Ocean Bay & I hurried thitherwards, where Henry waited, trying to forget the recent foulnesses witnessed at my lodgings. The chapel creaked like an old tub & its congregation numbered little more than the digits of two hands, but no traveler ever quenched his thirst at a desert oasis more thankfully than Henry & I gave worship this morning. The Lutheran founder has lain at rest in his chapel's cemetery these ten winters past & no ordained successor has yet ventured to claim captaincy of the altar. Its denomination, therefore, is a "rattle bag" of Christian creeds. Biblical passages were read by

that half of the congregation who know their letters & we joined in a hymn or two nominated by rota. The "steward" of this demotic flock, one Mr. D'Arnoq, stood beneath the modest cruciform & besought Henry & me to participate in likewise manner. Mindful of my own salvation from last week's tempest, I nominated Luke ch. 8, "And they came to him, & awoke him, saying, Master, master, we perish. Then he arose, & rebuked the wind & the raging of the water: & they ceased, & there was a calm."

Henry recited from Psalm the Eighth, in a voice as sonorous as any schooled dramatist: "Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou has put all things under his feet: all sheep & oxen, yea & the beasts of the field; the fowl of the air & the fish of the sea & whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas."

No organist played a *Magnificat* but the wind in the flue chimney, no choir sang a *Nunc Dimittis* but the wuthering gulls, yet I fancy the Creator was not displeazed. We resembled more the Early Christians of Rome than any later Church encrusted with arcana & gem-stones. Communal prayer followed. Parishioners prayed ad lib for the eradication of potato blight, mercy on a dead infant's soul, blessing upon a new fishing boat, &c. Henry gave thanks for the hospitality shown us visitors by the Christians of Chatham Isle. I echoed these sentiments & sent a prayer for Tilda, Jackson & my father-in-law during my extended absence.

After the service, the doctor & I were approached most cordially by an elder "mainmast" of that chapel, one Mr. Evans, who introduced Henry & me to his good wife (both circumvented the handicap of deafness by answering only those questions they *believed* had been asked & accepting only those answers they *believed* had been uttered—a stratagem embraced by many an American advocate) & their twin sons, Keegan & Dyfedd. Mr. Evans made it known that every week he had the custom of inviting Mr. DArnoq, our Preacher, to dine at their nearby home, for the latter dwells in Port Hutt, a promontory some miles distant. Would we, too, join their Sabbath Meal? Having already informed Henry of that Gomorrah back at the *Musket* & hearing cries of "Mutiny!" from our stomachs, we accepted the Evanses' kindness with gratitude.

Our hosts' farmstead, seated half a mile from Ocean Bay up a winding, blustery valley, proved to be a frugal building, but proof against those hell-bent storms that break the bones of so many hapless vessels upon nearby reefs. The parlor was inhabited by a monstrous hog's head (afflicted with droop-jaw & lazy-eye), killed by the twins on their sixteenth birthday, & a somnambulant Grandfather clock (at odds with my own pocket watch by a margin of hours. Indeed, one valued import from New Zealand is the accurate time). An Indian farmhand peered through the windowpane at his master's visitors. No more tatterdemalion a *renegado* I ever beheld, but Mr. Evans swore the quadroon, Barnabas, was "the fleetest sheepdog who ever ran upon two legs." Keegan & Dyfedd are honest woolly fellows, versed principally in the ways of sheep (the family own two hundred head), for neither has gone to "Town" (the islanders thus appellate New Zealand) nor undergone any schooling save Scripture lessons from their father, by dint of which they have learnt to read & write tolerably well.

Mrs. Evans said grace & I enjoyed my most pleasant repast (untainted by salt, maggots & oaths) since my farewell dinner with Consul Bax & the Partridges at the Beaumont. Mr. D'Arnoq told us tales of ships he has supplied during his ten-year on Chatham Isle, while Henry amused us with stories of patients, both illustrious & humble, he has benefacted in London & Polynesia. For my part I described the many hardships overcome by this American notary in order to locate the Australian beneficiary of a will executed in California. We washed down our mutton stew & apple dumpling with small ale brewed by Mr. Evans for trading with whalers. Kee-gan & Dyfedd left to attend to their livestock & Mrs. Evans retired to her kitchen duties. Henry asked if missionaries were now active on the Chathams, at which Mr. Evans & Mr. DArnoq exchanged looks & the former informed us, "Nay, the Maori don't take kindly to

us *Pakeha* spoiling their Moriori with too much civilization."
I questioned if such an ill as "too *much* civilization" existed or no? Mr. DArnoq told me, "If there is no God west of the Horn, why there's none of your constitution's *All men created equal,* neither, Mr. Ewing." The nomenclatures Maori & Pakeha I knew from the *Prophetess's* sojourn at the Bay of Islands, but I begged to know who or what Moriori might signify. My query unlocked a Pandora's Box of history, detailing the decline & fall of the Aboriginals of Chatham. We lit our pipes. Mr. DArnoq's narrative was unbroken three hours later when he had to depart for Port Hutt ere nightfall obscured the dykey way His spoken history, for my money, holds company with the pen of a Defoe or Melville & I shall record it in these pages, after, Morpheus willing, a sound sleep.

Monday, 11th November-

Dawn sticky & sunless. The Bay has a slimy appearance, but the weather is mild enough to allow repairs to continue on the *Prophetess,* I thank Neptune. A new mizzen-top is being hoisted into position as I write.
A short time past, while Henry & I breakfasted, Mr. Evans arrived hugger-mugger, importuning my doctor friend to attend to a reclusive neighbor, one Widow Bryden, who was thrown from her horse on a stony bog. Mrs. Evans was in attendance and fears that the widow lies in peril of her life. Henry fetched his doctor's case & left without delay (I offered to come, but Mr. Evans begged my forbearance, as the patient had extracted a promise that none but a doctor should see her incapacitated.) Walker, overhearing these transactions, told me no member of the male sex had crossed the widow's threshold these twenty years & decided that "the frigid old sow must be on her last trotters if she's letting Dr. Quack frisk her."

The origins of the Moriori of Rekohu (the native moniker for the Chathams) remain a mystery to this day Mr. Evans evinces the belief they are descended from Jews expelled from Spain, citing their hooked noses & sneering lips. Mr. DArnoq's preferred theorum, that the Moriori were once Maori whose canoes were wrecked upon these remotest of isles, is founded on similarities of tongue & mythology & thereby possesses a higher *carat* of logic. What is certain is that, after centuries or millennia of living in isolation, the Moriori lived as primitive a life as their woebegone cousins of Van Diemen's Land. Arts of boatbuilding (beyond crude woven rafts used to cross the channels betwixt islands) & navigation fell into disuse. That the terraqueous globe held other lands, trod by other feet, the Moriori dreamt not. Indeed, their language lacks a word for "race" & "Moriori" means, simply, "People." Husbandry was not practiced, for no mammals walked these isles until passing whalers willfully marooned pigs here to propagate a parlor. In their virgin state, the Moriori were foragers, picking up *paua* shellfish, diving for crayfish, plundering bird eggs, spearing seals, gathering kelp & digging for grubs & roots.
Thus far, the Moriori were but a local variant of most flaxen-skirted, feather-cloaked heathens of those dwindling "blind spots" of the ocean still unschooled by the White Man. Old Rekohu's claim to singularity, however, lay in its unique pacific creed. Since time immemorial, the Moriori's priestly caste dictated that whosoever spilt a man's blood killed his own *mana*—his honor, his worth, his standing & his soul. No Moriori would shelter, feed, converse with, or even *see* the persona non grata. If the ostracized murderer survived his first winter, the desperation of solitude usually drove him to a blowhole on Cape Young, where he took his life.

Consider this, Mr. D'Arnoq urged us. Two thousand savages (Mr. Evans's best guess) enshrine "Thou Shalt Not Kill" in word *& in deed* & frame an oral "Magna Carta" to create a harmony unknown elsewhere for the sixty centuries since Adam tasted the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. War was as alien a concept to the Moriori as the telescope is to the Pygmy. *Peace,* not a hiatus betwixt wars but millennia of imperishable peace, rules these far-flung islands. Who can deny Old Rekohu lay closer to More's Utopia than our States of Progress governed by war-hungry princelings in Versailles & Vienna, Washington & Westminster? "Here," declaimed Mr. D'Arnoq, "and here only, were those elusive phantasms, the noble savages, framed in flesh & blood!" (Henry, as we later made our way back to the *Musket,* confessed, "I could never describe a race of savages too backwards to throw a spear straight as 'noble.' ")

Glass & peace alike betray proof of fragility under repeated blows. The first blow to the Moriori was the Union Jack, planted in Skirmish Bay's sod in the name of King George by Lieutenant Broughton of HMS *Chatham* just fifty years ago. Three years later, Broughton's discovery was in Sydney & London chart agents & a scattering of free settlers (whose number included Mr. Evans's father), wrecked mariners & "convicts at odds with the New South Wales Colonial Office over the terms of their incarceration" were cultivating pumpkins, onions, maize & carrots. These they sold to needy sealers, the second blow to the Moriori's independence, who disappointed the Natives' hopes of prosperity by turning the surf pink with seals' blood. (Mr. D'Arnoq illustrated the profits by this arithmetic—a single pelt fetched 15 shillings in Canton & those pioneer sealers gathered over two thousand pelts *per boat!)* Within a few years the seals were found only on the outer rocks & the "sealers" too turned to farming potatoes, sheep & pig rearing on such a scale that the Chathams are now dubbed "The Garden of the Pacific." These parvenu farmers clear the land by bushfires that smolder beneath the peat for many seasons, surfacing in dry spells to sow renewed calamity

The third blow to the Moriori was the whalers, now calling at Ocean Bay, Waitangi, Owenga & Te Whakaru in sizable numbers for careening, refitting & refreshing. Whalers' cats & rats bred like the Plagues of Egypt & ate the burrow-nesting birds whose eggs the Moriori so valued for sustenance. Fourth, those motley maladies which cull the darker races whene'er White civilization draws near, sapped the Aboriginal census still further.

All these misfortunes the Moriori might have endured, however, were it not for reports arriving in New Zealand depicting the Chathams as a veritable Canaan of eel-stuffed lagoons, shellfish-carpeted coves & inhabitants who understand neither combat nor weapons. To the ears of the Ngati Tama & Ngati Mutunga, two clans of the Taranaki Te Ati Awa Maori (Maori genealogy is, Mr. D'Arnoq assures us, every twig as intricate as those genealogical trees so revered by the European gentry; indeed, any boy of that unlettered race can recall his grandfather's grandfather's name & "rank" in a trice), these rumors promised compensation for the tracts of their ancestral estates lost during the recent "Musket Wars." Spies were sent to test the Moriori's mettle by violating *tapu* & despoiling holy sites. These provocations the Moriori faced as our Lord importuned, by "turning the other cheek," & the transgressors returned to New Zealand confirming the Moriori's apparent pusillanimity The tattooed Maori *conquistadores* found their single-barked armada in Captain Harewood of the brig *Rodney* who in the dying months of 1835, agreed to transport nine hundred Maori & seven war canoes in two voyages, in *guerno* for seed potatoes, firearms, pigs, a great supply of scraped flax & a cannon. (Mr. D'Arnoq encountered Harewood five years ago, penurious in a Bay of Islands tavern. He at first denied being the *Rodney's* Harewood, then swore he had been coerced into conveying the Blacks, but was unclear how this coercion had been worked upon him.)

The *Rodney* embarked from Port Nicholas in November, but its heathen cargo of five hundred men, women & children, packed tight in the hold for the six-day voyage, bilged in ordure & seasickness & lacking the barest sufficiency of water, anchored at Whangatete Inlet in such an

enfeebled state that, *had they but the will,* even the Moriori might have slain their Martial brethren. The Goodly Samaritans chose instead to share the diminished abundance of Rekohu in preference to destroying their *mana* by bloodletting & nursed the sick & dying Maori back to health. "Maori had come to Rekohu before," Mr. D'Arnoq explained, "yet gone away again, so the Moriori assumed the colonists would likewise leave them in peace."

The Moriori's generosity was rewarded when Cpt. Harewood returned from New Zealand with another four hundred Maori. Now the strangers proceeded to lay claim to Chatham by *takahi,* a Maori ritual transliterated as "Walking the Land to Possess the Land." Old Rekohu was thus partitioned & the Moriori informed they were now Maori vassals. In early December, when some dozen Aboriginals protested, they were casually slain with tomahawks. The Maori proved themselves apt pupils of the English in "the dark arts of colonization."

Chatham Isle encloses a vast eastern salt marsh lagoon, Te Whanga, very nearly an inland sea but fecundated by the ocean at high tide through the lagoon's "lips" at Te Awapatiki. Fourteen years ago, the Moriori men held on that sacred ground a parliament. Three days it lasted, its object to settle this question: Would the spillage of Maori blood also destroy one's *mana?* Younger men argued the creed of Peace did not encompass foreign cannibals of whom their ancestors knew nothing. The Moriori must kill or be killed. Elders urged appeasement, for as long as the Moriori preserved their *mana* with their land, their gods & ancestors would deliver the race from harm. "Embrace your enemy," the elders urged, "to prevent him striking you." ("Embrace your enemy" Henry quipped, "to feel his dagger tickle your kidneys.")

The elders won the day but it mattered little. "When lacking numerical superiority" Mr. D'Arnoq told us, "the Maori seize an advantage by striking first & hardest, as many hapless British & French can testify from their graves." The Ngati Tama & Ngati Mutunga had held councils of their own. The Moriori menfolk returned from their parliament to ambushes & a night of infamy beyond nightmare, of butchery, of villages torched, of rapine, of men & women, impaled in rows on beaches, of children hiding in holes, scented & dismembered by hunting dogs. Some chiefs kept an eye to the morrow & slew only enough to instill terrified obedience in the remainder. Other chiefs were not so restrained. On Waitangi Beach fifty Moriori were beheaded, filleted, wrapped in flax leaves, then baked in a giant earth oven with yams & sweet potatoes. Not half those Moriori who had seen Old Rekohu's last sunset were alive to see the Maori sun rise. ("Less than an hundred pure-blooded Moriori now remain," mourned Mr. D'Arnoq. "On *paper* the British Crown freed these from the yoke of slavery years ago, but the Maori do not care for paper. We are one week's sail from the Governor's House & Her Majesty maintains no garrison on Chatham.")

I asked, why had not the Whites stayed the hands of the Maori during the massacre?

Mr. Evans was no longer sleeping & not half so deaf as I had fancied. "Have you ever seen Maori warriors in a blood frenzy, Mr. Ewing?"

I said I had not.

"But you have seen sharks in a blood frenzy, have you not?"

I replied that I had.

"Near enough. Imagine a bleeding calf is thrashing in shark-infested shallows. What to do—stay out of the water or try to stay the jaws of the sharks? Such was our choice. Oh, we helped the few that came to our door—our shepherd Barnabas was one—but if we stepped out in that night we'd not be seen again. Remember, we Whites numbered below fifty in Chatham at that time. Nine hundred Maoris, altogether. Maoris bide by *Pakeha,* Mr. Ewing, but they despise us. Never forget it."

What moral to draw? Peace, though beloved of our Lord, is a cardinal virtue only if your neighbors share your conscience.

Night—

The name of Mr. D'Arnoq is not well-loved in the *Musket*. "A White Black, a mixed-blood mongrel of a man," Walker told me. "Nobody knows *what* he is." Suggs, a one-armed shepherd who lives under the bar, swore our acquaintance is a Bonapartist general hiding here under assumed colors. Another swore he was a Polack.

Nor is the word *Moriori* much loved. A drunken Maori mulatto told me that the entire history of the Aboriginals had been dreamt up by the "mad old Lutheran" & Mr. DArnoq preaches his Moriori gospel only to legitimize his own swindling land claims against the Maori, the true owners of Chatham, who have been coming to & fro in their canoes since time immemorial! James Coffee, a hog farmer, said the Maori had performed the White Man a service by exterminating another race of brutes to make space for us, adding that Russians train Kossacks to "soften Siberian hides" in a similar way

I protested, to *civilize* the Black races by conversion should be our mission, not their extirpation, for God's hand had crafted them, too. All hands in the tavern fired broadsides at me for my "sentimental Yankee claptrap!" "The best of 'em is not too good to die like a pig!" one shouted. "The only gospel the Blacks *savvy* is the gospel of the d——d whip!" Still another: "We Britishers abolished slavery in our empire—no American can say as much!"

Henry's stance was ambivalent, to say the least. "After years of working with missionaries, I am tempted to conclude that their endeavors merely prolong a dying race's agonies for ten or twenty years. The merciful plowman shoots a trusty horse grown too old for service. As philanthropists, might it not be our duty to likewise ameliorate the savages' sufferings by *hastening* their extinction? Think on your Red Indians, Adam, think on the treaties you Americans abrogate & renege on, time & time & time again. More humane, surely & more honest, just to knock the savages on the head & get it over with?"

As many truths as men. Occasionally, I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in imperfect simulacrums of itself, but as I approach, it bestirs itself & moves deeper into the thorny swamp of dissent.

Tuesday, 12th November—

Our noble Cpt. Molyneux today graced the *Musket* to haggle over the price of five barrels of salt-horse with my landlord (the matter was settled by a rowdy game *of trentuno* won by the captain). Much to my surprise, ere he returned to inspect the progress in the shipyard, Cpt. Molyneux requested some confidential words with Henry in my companion's room. The consultation continues as I write. My friend has been warned of the captain's despotism, but still, I do not like it.

Later—

Cpt. Molyneux, it transpires, suffers from a medical complaint which, if untreated, may impair those divers skills demanded of his station. The captain has therefore proposed to Henry that my friend voyage with us to Honolulu (victualing & private berth gratis), assuming the responsibilities both of Ship's Doctor & personal physician to Cpt. Molyneux until our arrival. My friend explained he had intended to return to London, but Cpt. Molyneux was most insistent. Henry promised to think the matter over & come to a decision by Friday morning, the

day now set for the *Prophetess's* departure.
Henry did not name the captain's illness, nor did I ask, though one needs not be an Aesculapian to glean Cpt. Molyneux is a slave to gout. My friend's discretion does him much credit. Whatever eccentricities Henry Goose may exhibit as a collector of curios, I believe Dr. Goose is an exemplary healer & it is my zealous, if self-serving, hope that Henry returns a favorable answer to the captain's proposal.

Wednesday, 13th November—

I come to my journal as a Catholick to a confessor. My bruises insist these extraordinary past five hours were not a sickbed vision conjured by my Ailment, but real events. I shall describe what befell me this day, steering as close to the facts as is possible.
This morning, Henry paid Widow Bryden's hut another call to adjust her splint & reapply poultice. Rather than submit to idleness, I resolved to scale a high hill to the north of Ocean Bay, known as Conical Tor, whose lofty elevation promises the best aspect of Chatham Isle's "backcountry" (Henry, a man of maturer years, has too much sense to tramp unsurveyed islands peopled by cannibals.) The tired creek who waters Ocean Bay guided me upstream through marshy pastures, stump-pocked slopes, into virgin forest so rotted, knotted & tangled, I was obliged to clamber aloft like an orang-utan! A volley of hailstones began abruptly, filled the woods with a frenzied percussion & ended on the sudden. I spied a "Robin Black-Breast" whose plumage was tarry as night & whose tameness bordered on contempt. An unseen *tui* took to song, but my inflamed fancy awarded it powers of human speech:—"Eye for an eye!" it called ahead, flitting through its labyrinth of buds, twigs & thorns. "Eye for an eye!" After a grueling climb, I conquered the summit grievously torn & scratched at I know not What o'Clock, for I neglected to wind my pocket watch last night. The opaque mists that haunt these isles (the Aboriginal name Rekohu, Mr. D'Arnoq informs us, signifies "Sun of Mists") had descended as I ascended, so my cherished panorama was naught but treetops disappearing into drizzle. A miserly reward for my exertions, indeed.
The "summit" of Conical Tor was a crater, a stone's throw in diameter, encircling a crag-walled depression whose floor lay unseen far beneath the funereal foliage of a gross or more *kopi* trees. I should not have cared to investigate its depths without the aid of ropes & a pickax. I was circumambulating the crater's lip, seeking a clearer trail back to Ocean Bay, when a startling *hoo-roosh!* sent me diving to the ground:—the mind abhors a vacancy & is wont to people it with phantoms, thus I glimpsed first a tusked hog charging, then a Maori warrior, spear held aloft, his face inscribed with the ancestral hatred of his race.
'Twas but a mollyhawk, wings "flupping" the air like a windjammer. I watched her disappear back into the diaphanous fog. I was a full yard shy of the crater's lip, but to my horror, the turf beneath me disintegrated like suet crust—I stood on not solid ground but an overhang! I plunged to my midriff, grasping some grasses in desperation, but these broke in my fingers & down I plummeted, a mannikin tossed into a well! I recall spinning in space, yelling & twigs clawing my eyes, cartwheeling & my jacket snagging, tearing loose; loose earth; the anticipation of pain; an urgent, formless prayer for help; a bush slowing but not halting my descent & a hopeless attempt to regain balance—sliding—lastly terra firma careering upwards to meet me. The impact knocked my senses out of me.
Amidst nebulous quilts & summery pillows I lay, in a bedroom in San Francisco similar to my own. A dwarfish servant said, "You're a *very* silly boy, Adam." Tilda & Jackson entered, but when I voiced my jubilation, not English but the guttural barkings of an Indian race burst from my mouth! My wife & son were shamed by me & mounted a carriage. I gave chase, striving to

rectify this misunderstanding, but the carriage dwindled into the fleeing distance until I awoke in bosky twilight & a silence, booming & eternal. My bruises, cuts, muscles & extremities groaned like a courtroom of malcontent litigants.

A mattress of moss & mulch, lain down in that murky hollow since the second day of Creation, had preserved my life. Angels preserved my limbs, for if even a single arm or leg had been broken I should be lying there still, unable to extricate myself, awaiting death from the elements or the claws of beasts. Upon regaining my feet & seeing how far I had slid & fallen (the height of a foremast) with no worse damage to my person, I thanked our Lord for my deliverance, for indeed, "Thou calledst in trouble, & I delivered thee; I answered thee in the secret place of thunder."

My eyes adjusted to the gloom & revealed a sight at once indelible, fearsome & sublime. First one, then ten, then hundreds of faces emerged from the perpetual dim, adzed by idolaters into bark, as if Sylvan spirits were frozen immobile by a cruel enchanter. No adjectives may properly delineate that basilisk tribe! Only the inanimate may be so alive. I traced my thumbs along their awful visages. I do not doubt, I was the first White in that mausoleum since its prehistoric inception. The youngest dendroglyph is, I suppose, ten years old, but the elders, grown distended as the trees matured, were incised by heathens whose very ghosts are long defunct. Such antiquity surely bespoke the hand of Mr. D'Arnoq's Moriori.

Time passed in that bewitched place & I sought to effect my escape, encouraged by the knowledge that the artists of the "tree sculptures" must earn regular egress from that same pit. One wall looked less sheer than the others & fibrous creepers offered a "rigging" of sorts. I was readying myself for the climb when a puzzling "hum" came to my attention. "Who goes there?" I called (a rash act for an unarmed White trespasser in a heathen shrine). "Shew yourself!" The silence swallowed my words & their echo & mocked me. My Ailment stirred in my spleen. The "hum" I traced to a mass of flies orbiting a protuberance impaled on a broken-off branch. I poked the lump with a pine stick & nearly retched, for 'twas a piece of stinking offal. I turned to flee, but duty obliged me to dispel a black suspicion that a human heart hung on that tree. I concealed my nose & mouth in my 'kerchief & with my stick, touched a severed ventricle. The organ pulsed as if alive! & my scalding Ailment shot up my spine! As in a dream (but it was not!) a pellucid salamander emerged from its carrion dwelling & darted along the stick to my hand! I flung the stick away & saw not where that salamander disappeared. My blood was enriched by fright & I hastened to effect my escape. Easier written than done, for had I slipped & plunged anew from those vertiginous walls my luck may not have softened my fall a second time, but foot holes had been hewn into the rock & by God's grace I gained the crater's lip with no mishap. Back in the dismal cloud, I craved the presence of men of my own hue, yes, even the rude sailors in the *Musket,* & began my descent on the nonce in what I hoped was a southerly direction. My initial resolve to report all I had seen (surely, Mr. Walker, the de facto if not de jure Consul, should be informed of the robbery of a human heart?) weakened as I approached Ocean Bay. I am still undecided what to report & to whom. The heart was most likely a hog's, or sheep's, surely The prospect of Walker & his ilk felling the trees & selling the dendroglyphs to collectors offends my conscience. A sentimentalist I may be, but I do not wish to be the agent of the Moriori's final violation. *

Evening—

The Southern Cross was bright in the sky ere Henry returned to the *Musket,* having been detained by more islanders seeking to consult "Widow Bryden's Healer Man" on their rheums,

yaws & dropsy. "If potatoes were dollars," rued my friend, "I should be richer than Nebuchadnezzar!" He was concerned by my (much edited) misadventure on Conical Tor & insisted on examining my injuries. Earlier I had prevailed upon the Indian maid to fill my bath & emerged much recruited. Henry donated a pot of balm for my inflammations & refused to take a cent for it. Fearing this may be my last chance to consult with a gifted physician (Henry intends to refuse Cpt. Molyneux's proposal), I unburdened my fears vis-à-vis my Ailment. He listened soberly & asked about the frequency & duration of my spells. Henry regretted he lacked the time & apparatus for a compleat diagnosis, but recommended, upon my return to San Francisco, I find a specialist in tropical parasites as a matter of urgency. (I could not bring myself to tell him there are none.) I slumber not.

Thursday, 14th November—

We make sail with the morning tide. I am once more aboard the *Prophetess,* but I cannot pretend it is good to be back. My coffin now stores three great coils of hawser, which I must scale to attain my bunk, for not one inch of floor is visible. Mr. D'Arnoq sold half a dozen barrels of sundry provisions to the quartermaster & a bolt of sailcloth (much to Walker's disgust). He came aboard to supervise their delivery & collect payment himself & bid me Godspeed. In my coffin we were squeezed like two men in a pothole, so we repaired to the deck for it is a pleasant evening. After discussing divers matters we shook hands & he climbed down to his waiting ketch, ably crewed by two young manservants of mongrel race.

Mr. Roderick has little sympathy with my petition to have the offending hawser removed elsewhere, for he is obliged to quit his private cabin (for the reason stated below) & move to the fo'c'sle with the common sailors, whose number has swollen with five Castilians "poached" from the Spaniard at anchor in the Bay. Their captain was the portrait of a Fury, yet short of declaring war on the *Prophetess*—a battle sure to bloody his nose, for he pilots the leakiest tub—he can do little but thank his stars Cpt. Molyneux required no more deserters. The very words "California Bound" are dusted in gold & beckon all men thitherwards like moths to a lantern. These five replace the two deserters at the Bay of Islands & the hands lost in the tempest, but we are still several men short of a full crew. Finbar tells me the men grumble over the new arrangements, for with Mr. Roderick lodged in their fo'c'sle, they cannot yarn freely over a bottle.

Fate has dealt me a fine compensation. After paying Walker's usurous bill (nor did I tip that scoundrel a cent), I was packing my jackwood trunk when Henry entered, greeting me thus: —"Good morning, Shipmate!" God has answered my prayers! Henry has accepted the post of Ship's Doctor & I am no longer friendless in this floating farmyard. So ornery a mule is the common sailor that, instead of gratitude that a doctor shall be on hand to splint their breakages & treat their infections, one o'erhears them moaning, "What are we, to carry a Ship's Doctor who can't walk a bowsprit? A Royal Barge?"

I must confess to a touch of pique that Cpt. Molyneux afforded a fare-paying gentleman such as myself only my lamentable berth, when a more commodious cabin lay at his disposal all along. Of far greater consequence, however, is Henry's promise to turn his formidable talents to a diagnosis of my Ailment as soon as we are at sea. My relief is indescribable.

Friday, 15th November—

We got under weigh at daybreak, notwithstanding Friday is a Jonah amongst sailors. (Cpt. Molyneux growls, "Superstitions, Saints' Days & other blasted fripperies are fine sport for Popish fishwives but *I* am in the business of turning a profit!") Henry & I did not venture on deck, for all hands were busy with rigging & a southerly blows very fresh with a heavy sea; the ship was troublesome last night & is not less so today. We passed half the day arranging Henry's apothecary Besides the appurtenances of the modern physician, my friend owns several learned volumes, in English, Latin & German. A case holds "spectra" of powders in stoppered bottles labeled in Greek. These he compounds to make various pills & unguents. We peered through the steerage hatch towards noon & the Chathams were ink stains on the leaden horizon, but the rolling & pitching are unsafe for those whose sea legs have vacationed the week ashore.

Afternoon—

Torgny the Swede knocked on my coffin door. Surprized & intrigued by his furtive manner, I bade him enter. He seated himself upon a "pyramid" of hawser & whispered that he bore a proposal from a ring of shipmates. "Tell us where the best veins are, the secret ones you locals are keeping for yourselves. Me 'n' my fellows'll do the pack work. You'll just sit pretty & we'll cut you in a tenth share."

I required a moment to understand that Torgny was referring to the Californian mining fields. So, a widespread desertion is in the offing once the *Prophetess* reaches her destination & I own, my sympathies are with the seamen! Saying so, I swore to Torgny that I possessed no knowledge of the gold deposits, for I have been absent this twelvemonth, but I would gratis compose a map illustrating the rumored "Eldorados" & gladly. Torgny was agreeable. Tearing a leaf from this journal, I was sketching a schema of Sausa-lito, Benecia, Stanislaus, Sacramento &c. when a malevolent voice spoke out. "Quite the oracle, no, Mr. Quillcock?"

We had not heard Boerhaave descend the companionway & nudge open my door! Torgny cried in dismay, declaring his guilt in a trice. "What, pray," continued the first mate, "what business have you with our passenger, Pustule of Stockholm?" Torgny was struck dumb, but I would not be cowed & told the bully I was describing the "sights" of my town, the better for Torgny to enjoy his shore leave.

Boerhaave raised his eyebrows. "You allot shore leave now, do you? New news to my old ears. That paper, Mr. Ewing, if you please." I did not please. My gift to the seaman was not the Dutchman's to commandeer. "Oh, begging your pardon, Mr. Ewing. Torgny, take receipt of your *gift*." I had no choice but to hand it to the prostrate Swede. Mr. Boerhaave uttered, "Torgny, give me *your* gift instanter or, by the hinges of hell, you shall regret the day you crawled from your mother's [my quill curls at recording his profanity]." The mortified Swede complied.

"Most educational," remarked Boerhaave, eyeing my cartography "The captain will be delighted to learn of the pains you are taking to better our scabby Jacks, Mr. Ewing. Torgny you're on masthead watch for twenty-four hours. Forty-eight if you're seen taking refreshment. Drink you own p—— if you get a thirst."

Torgny fled, but the first mate was not finished with me. "Sharks ply these waters, Mr. Quillcock Trail ships for tasty jetsam, they do. Once I saw one eat a passenger. He, like you, was neglectful of his safety & fell o'erboard. We heard his screams. Great Whites *toy* with their dinner, gnawing 'em slow, a leg here, a nibble there & that miserable b—— was alive longer than you'd credit. Think on it." He shut my coffin door. Boerhaave, like all bullies & tyrants,

takes pride in that very hatefulness which makes him notorious.

Saturday, 16th November—

My Fates have inflicted upon me the greatest unpleasance of my voyage to date! A shade of Old Rekohu has thrust *me,* whose only desiderata are quietude & discretion, into a pillory of suspicion & gossip! Yet I am guilty on *no counts* save Christian trustingness & relentless ill fortune! One month to the day has passed since we put out from New South Wales, when I wrote this sunny sentence, "I anticipate an uneventful & tedious voyage." How that entry mocks me! I shall never forget the last eighteen hours, but since I cannot sleep nor think (& Henry is now abed) my only escape from insomnia now is to curse my Luck on these sympathetic pages.

Last night I retired to my coffin "dog tired." After my prayers I blew out my lantern & lulled by the ship's myriad voices I sank into the shallows of sleep when a husky voice *inside my coffin!* awakened me wide-eyed & affright! "Mr. Ewing," beseeched this urgent whisper. "Do not fear—Mr. Ewing—no harm, no shout, please, sir."

I jumped involuntarily & knocked my head against the bulkhead. By the twin glimmers of amber-light through my ill-fitted door & starlight through my porthole, I saw a serpentine length of hawser uncoil itself & a black form heave itself free like the dead at the Last Trump! A powerful hand seemed to sail through the blackness & sealed my lips ere I could cry out! My assailant hissed, "Missa Ewing, no harm, you safe, I friend of Mr. D'Arnoq—you know he Christian—please, quiet!"

Reason, at last, rallied against my fear. A man, not a spirit, was hiding in my room. If he wished to slit my throat for my hat, shoes & legal box, I would already be dead. If my gaoler was a stowaway, why he, not I, was in peril for his life. From his uncut language, his faint silhouette & his smell, I intuited the stowaway was an Indian, alone on a boat of fifty White Men. Very well. I nodded, slowly, to indicate I would not cry out.

The cautious hand released my lips. "My name is Autua," he said. "You know I, you seen I, aye—you pity I." I asked what he was talking about. "Maori whip I—you seen." My memory overcame the bizarreness of my situation & I recalled the Moriori being flogged by the "Lizard King." This heartened him. "You good man—Mr. DArnoq tell you good man—he hid I in your cabin yesterday night—I escape—you help, Mr. Ewing." Now a groan escaped my lips! & his hand clasped my mouth anew. "If you no help—I in trouble dead."

All too true, I thought, & moreover you'll drag me down with you, unless I convince Cpt. Molyneux of my innocence! (I burned with resentment at DArnoq's act & burn still. Let *him* save his "good causes" & leave innocent bystanders be!) I told the stowaway he was already "in trouble dead." The *Prophetess* was a mercantile vessel, not an "underground railroad" for rescued slaves.

"I able seaman!" insisted the Black. "I earn passage!" Well & good, I told him (dubious of his claim to be a sailor of pedigree) & urged him to surrender himself to the captain's mercies forthwith. "No! They no listen I! *Swim away home, Nigger,* they say & throw I in drink! You lawman aye? You go, you talk, I stay, I hide! Please. Cap'n hear you, Missa Ewing. Please."

In vain I sought to convince him, no intercessor at Cpt. Molyneux's court was less favored than the Yankee Adam Ewing. The Moriori's adventure was his own & I desired no part in it. His hand found mine & to my consternation closed my fingers around the hilt of a dagger. Resolute & bleak was his demand. "Then kill I." With a terrible calmness & certitude, he pressed its tip against his throat. I told the Indian he was mad. "I not mad, you no help I, you kill I, just same. It's true, you know it." (I implored him to restrain himself & speak soft.) "So

kill I. Say to others I attack you, so you kill I. I ain't be fish food, Mr. Ewing. Die here is better."

Cursing my conscience singly, my fortune doubly & Mr. D'Arnoq trebly, I bade him sheath his knife & for Heaven's sake conceal himself lest one of the crew hear and come knocking. I promised to approach the captain at breakfast, for to interrupt his slumbers would only ensure the doom of the enterprise. This satisfied the stowaway & he thanked me. He slid back inside the coils of rope, leaving me to the near-impossible task of constructing a case for an Aboriginal stowaway, aboard an English schooner, without attainting his discoverer & cabinmate with a charge of conspiracy. The savage's breathing told me he was sleeping. I was tempted to make a dash for the door & howl for help, but in the eyes of God my word was my bond, even to an Indian.

The cacophony of timbers creaking, of masts swaying, of ropes flexing, of canvas clapping, of feet on decks, of goats bleating, of rats scuttling, of the pumps beating, of the bell dividing the watches, of melees & laughter from the fo'c'sle, of orders, of windlass shanties & of Tethys' eternal realm; all lulled me as I calculated how best I could convince Cpt. Molyneux of my innocence in Mr. D'Arnoq's plot (now I must be more vigilant than ever that this diary should not be read by unfriendly eyes) when a falsetto yell, beginning far off but speeding nearer at a crossbolt's velocity was silenced by the deck, mere inches above where I lay.

Such a terrible finality! Prone I lay, shocked & rigid, forgetting to breathe. Shouts far & near rose, feet gathered & an alarum of "Raise Doctor Goose!" cried forth.

"Sorry b— — fall from rigging, dead now." The Indian whispered as I made haste to investigate the disturbance. "You can nothing, Missa Ewing." I ordered him to stay hidden & hurried out. I fancy the stowaway sensed how tempted I was to use the accident to betray him. The crew stood around a man lying prone at the base of the mid-mast. By the lurching lantern light I recognized one of the Castili-ans. (I own that my first emotion was relief that not Rafael but another had fallen to his death.) I overheard the Icelander say the dead man had won his compatriots' arrack ration at cards & drunk it all before his watch. Henry arrived in his nightshirt with his doctor's bag. He knelt by the mangled form & felt for a pulse, but shook his head. "This fellow has no need of a doctor." Mr. Roderick retrieved the Castilian's boots & clothes for auction & Mankin fetched some third-rate sackcloth for the cadaver. (Mr. Boerhaave will deduct the sackcloth from the auction's profits.) The Jacks returned to their fo'c'sle or their stations in silence, every man made somber by this reminder of the fragility of life. Henry, Mr. Roderick & I stayed to watch the Castilians perform their Catholick death rites over their countryman before knotting up the sack & committing his body to the deep with tears & dolorous *adíos!* "Passionate Latinos," observed Henry, bidding me a second good night. I yearned to share the secret of the Indian with my friend, but held my tongue lest my complicity infect him.

Returning from the melancholy scene, I saw a lantern gleam in the galley. Finbar sleeps there "to ward off pilferers," but he too was roused by the night's excitement. I recalled that the stowaway may not have eaten for a day & a half, fearfully, for what bestial depravity might a savage not be driven to by an empty stomach? My act might have stood against me on the morrow, but I told the cook a mighty hunger was robbing me of sleep & (at double the usual expense "on account o' the unseason'ble hour") I procured a platter of sauerkraut, sausage & buns hard as cannonballs.

Back in the confines of my cabin, the savage thanked me for the kindness & ate that humble fare as if it were a Presidential Banquet. I did not confess my true motives, viz., the fuller his stomach, the less likely he was to consume me, but instead asked him why, during his

flogging, he had smiled at me. "Pain is strong, aye—but friends' eyes, more strong." I told him that he knows next to nothing about me & I know nothing about him. He jabbed at his eyes & jabbed at mine, as if that single gesture were ample explanation.

The wind rose higher as the middle watch wore on, making the timbers moan & whipping up the seas & sluicing over the decks. Seawater was soon dripping into my coffin, trickling down the walls & blotting my blanket. "You might have chosen a drier hidey-hole than mine," I whispered, to test the stowaways wakefulness. "Safe better'n dry, Missa Ewing," he murmured, alert as I. Why, I asked, was he beaten so savagely in the Indian hamlet? A silence stretched itself out. "I seen too much o' the world, I ain't good slave." To ward off seasickness during those dreary hours, I teazed out the stowaway's history. (I cannot, moreover, deny my curiosity) His pidgin delivered his tale brokenly, so its substance only shall I endeavor to set down here.

White men's ships bore vicissitudes to Old Rekohu, as Mr. D'Arnoq narrated, but also marvels. During my stowaway's boyhood, Autua yearned to learn more of these pale peoples from places whose existence, in his grandfather's time, was the realm of myths. Autua claims his father had been amongst the natives Lt. Broughton's landing party encountered in Skirmish Bay & spent his infancy hearing the yarn told & retold:—of the "Great Albatross," paddling through the morning mists; its vividly plumaged, strangely jointed servants who canoed ashore, facing backwards; of the Albatross servants' gibberish (a bird language?); of their smoke breathing; of their heinous violation of that *tapu* forbidding strangers to touch canoes (doing so curses the vessel & renders it as unseaworthy as if an ax had been taken to it); of the pursuant altercation; of those "shouting staffs" whose magical wrath could kill a man across the beach; & of the bright skirt of ocean-blue, cloud-white & blood-red that the servants hoisted aloft a pole before rowing back to the Great Albatross. (This flag was removed & presented to a chieftain, who wore it proudly until the scrofula took him.)

Autua had an uncle, Koche, who shipped aboard a Boston sealer, circa 1825. (The stowaway is unsure of his exact age.) Mori-ori were prized crew amongst such vessels, for in lieu of martial prowess, Rekohu's manhood "won their spurs" by seal hunting & swimming feats. (To claim his bride, as a further example, a young man had to dive to the seabed & surface with a crayfish in each hand & a third in his mouth.) Newly discovered Polynesians, it should be added, make easy prey for unscrupulous captains. Autua's uncle Koche returned after five years, garbed in *Pakeha* clothes with rings in his ears, a modest pouch of dollars & *réals,* possessed of strange customs ("smoke breathing" amongst them), discordant oaths & tales of cities & sights too outlandish for the Moriori tongue to delineate.

Autua swore to ship on the next vessel leaving Ocean Bay & see these exotic places for himself. His uncle persuaded a second mate on a French whaler to ship the ten-year-old (?) Autua as an apprentice. In the Moriori's subsequent career at sea, he saw the ice ranges of Antarctica, whales turned to islets of gore, then barrels of sperm oil; in the becalmed ashy Encantadas, he hunted giant tortoises; in Sydney, he saw grand buildings, parks, horse-drawn carriages & ladies in bonnets & the miracles of civilization; he shipped opium from Calcutta to Canton; survived dysentery in Batavia; lost half of an ear in a skirmish with Mexicans afore the altar at Santa Cruz; survived shipwreck at the Horn & saw Rio de Janeiro, though did not step ashore; & everywhere he observed that casual brutality lighter races show the darker.

Autua returned in the summer of 1835, a worldly-wise young man of about twenty He planned to take a local bride & build a house & cultivate some acres, but as Mr. DArnoq relates, by the winter solstice of that year every Moriori who had not perished was a slave of the Maori. The returnee's years amongst crews of all nations did not elevate Autua in the invaders' estimation.

(I observed how ill-timed was the prodigal's homecoming. "No, Missa Ewing, Rekohu *called* me home, so I *see* her death so I *know"*—he tapped his head—"the truth.")
Autua's master was the lizard-tattooed Maori, Kupaka, who told his horrified, broken slaves that he had come to cleanse them of their false idols ("Have your gods saved you?" taunted Kupaka); their polluted language ("My whip will teach you pure Maori!"); their tainted blood ("Inbreeding has diluted your original *mana*!"*)*. Henceforth Moriori unions were proscribed & all issue fathered by Maori men on Moriori women were declared Maori. The earliest transgressors were executed in gruesome ways & the survivors lived in that state of lethargy engendered by relentless subjugation. Autua cleared land, planted wheat & tended hogs for Kupaka until he won enough trust to effect his escape. ("Secret places on Rekohu, Missa Ewing, combes, pitfalls, caves deep in Motoporoporo Forest, so dense no dogs scent you there." I fancy I fell into one such secret place.)
A year later he was recaptured, but Moriori slaves were now too scarce to be indiscriminately slaughtered. The lower Maori were obliged to labor alongside the serfs, much to their disgust. ("We forsook our ancestors' land in Aotearoa for this miserable rock?" they complained.) Autua escaped again & during his second spell of freedom he was granted secret asylum by Mr. DArnoq for some months, at no little risk to the latter. During this sojourn Autua was baptized & turned to the Lord.
Kupaka's men caught up with the fugitive after a year & six-month, but this time the mercurial chieftain evinced a respect for Autua's spirit. After a retributive lashing, Kupaka appointed his slave as fisherman for his own table. Thus employed, the Moriori let another year go by until, one afternoon, he found a rare *moeeka* fish flapping in his net. He told Kupaka's wife this king of fish could be eaten only by a king of men & showed her how to prepare it for her husband. ("Bad bad poison this *moeeka* fish, Missa Ewing, one bite, aye, you sleep, you never wake no mo'.") During that night's feasting, Autua snuck from the encampment, stole his master's canoe & rowed across the current-prone, choppy, moonless sea to deserted Pitt Island, two leagues to the south of Chatham Isle (known as Rangiauria in Moriori & revered as mankind's birthplace).
Luck favored the stowaway, for he arrived safe at dawn as a squall blew up & no canoes made the crossing after him. Autua subsisted in his Polynesian Eden on wild celery watercress, eggs, berries, an occasional young boar (he risked fires only under cover of darkness or mist) & the knowledge that Kupaka, at least, had met a condign punishment. Was his solitude not unbearable? "Nights, ancestors visited. Days, I yarned tales of Maui to birds & birds yarned sea tales to I."
The fugitive lived thus for many a season until last September, when a winter gale wrecked the whaler *Eliza* from Nantucket on Pitt Island Reef. All hands drowned, but our Mr. Walker, zealous in his pursuit of easy guineas, crossed the straits seeking salvage. When he found signs of habitation & saw Kupaka's old canoe (each is storiated with unique carvings), he knew he had found treasure of interest to his Maori neighbors. Two days later a large hunting party rowed to Pitt Island from the mainland. Autua sat on the beach & watched them arrive, surprized only to see his old enemy, Kupaka, grizzled but very much alive & shouting war chants.
My uninvited cabinmate concluded his tale. "That b——'s greedy dog stole *moeeka* from kitchen & died, not the Maori. Aye, Kupaka flogged me, but he's old & far from home & his *mana* is hollow & starved. Maori thrive on wars & revenge & feudin', but peace kills 'em off. Many go back to Zealand. Kupaka cannot, his land is no mo'. Then last week, Missa Ewing, I see you & I know, you save I, I know it."

The morning watch smote four bells & my porthole betrayed a rainy dawn. I had slept a little, but my prayers that the dawn would dissolve the Moriori were unheeded. I bade him to playact *he had only just revealed himself* & make no mention of our night's conversation. He signaled comprehension, but I feared the worst: an Indian's wit was no match for a Boerhaave.

Along the gangway I stepped (the *Prophetess* was bucking like a young bronco) to the officers' mess, knocked & entered. Mr. Roderick & Mr. Boerhaave were listening to Cpt. Molyneux. I cleared my throat & bade all good morning, at which our amicable captain swore, "You can better my morning, by b— —ing off, instanter!"

Coolly, I asked *when* the captain might find time to hear news of an Indian stowaway who had just emerged from the coils of hawser taking up "my so-called cabin." During the ensuing silence Cpt. Molyneux's pale, horny-toad complexion turned roast beef pink. Ere his blast was launched, I added the stowaway claimed to be an able seaman & begged to work his passage. Mr. Boerhaave forestalled his captain with the predicted accusations & exclaimed, "On Dutch merchantmen those who abet stowaways share their fate!" I reminded the Hollander we sailed under an English flag & put it to him why, if *I* had hid the stowaway under the coils of hawser, had I asked & asked *again* since Thursday night for the unwonted hawser to be removed, thereby begging for my putative "conspiracy" to be uncovered? Hitting that bull's-eye fired my mettle & I assured Cpt. Molyneux that the baptized stowaway had resorted to this extreme measure lest his Maori master, who had vowed to eat his slave's warm liver (I sprinkled a little "seasoning" on my version of events), directed his ungodly wrath towards his rescuer.

Mr. Boerhaave swore, "So this d— —d Blackamoor wants us to be *grateful* to him?" No, I replied, the Moriori asks for a chance to prove his value to the *Prophetess*. Mr. Boerhaave spat out, "A stowaway is a stowaway even if he sh— —s silver nuggets! What's his name?" I did not know, I replied, for I had not conducted an interview with the man but come to the captain expeditiously

Cpt. Molyneux spoke at last. "Able seaman *first* class, you say?" His wrath had cooled at the prospect of earning a valuable pair of hands he would not have to pay. "An Indian? Where did he salt his burns?" I repeated, two minutes was insufficient to learn his history, but my instinct considered the Indian an honest fellow.

The captain wiped his beard. "Mr. Roderick, accompany our passenger & his instinct & fetch their pet savage afoot the mizzen." He tossed a key to his first mate. "Mr. Boerhaave, my fowling piece, if you please."

The second mate & I did as bid. "A risky business," Mr. Roderick warned me. "The only statute book on the *Prophetess* is the Old Man's Whim." Another statute book named Conscience is observed *lex loci* wherever God sees, I responded. Autua was awaiting his trial in the cotton trowzers I purchased in Port Jackson (he had climbed aboard from Mr. D Arnoq's boat in naught but his savage's loincloth & a shark-tooth necklace). His back was exposed. His lacerations, I hoped, would pay testimony to his resilience & bestir sympathy in the observers' breasts.

Rats behind the arras spread tidings of the sport & most hands were gathered on deck. (My ally, Henry, was still abed, unaware of my jeopardy.) Cpt. Molyneux sized the Moriori up as if inspecting a mule & addressed him thus: "Mr. Ewing, who knows *nothing* about how you boarded my vessel, says you regard yourself a seaman."

Autua replied with courage & dignity "Aye, Cap'n, sir, two years on whaler *Mississippi* of Le Havre under Captain Maspero & four years on *Cornucopia* of Philadelphia under Captain Caton, three years on an Indiaman—"

Cpt. Molyneux interrupted & indicated Autua's trowzers. "Did you pilfer this garment from below?" Autua was sensible that I, too, was on trial. "That Christian gent'man gave, sir." The crew followed the stowaway's finger to myself & Mr. Boerhaave thrust at the chink in my

armor. “He did? *When* was this gift awarded?” (I recalled my father-in-law’s aphorism “To fool a judge, feign fascination, but to bamboozle the whole court, feign boredom” & I pretended to extract a speck from my eye.) Autua answered with primed percipience. “Ten minutes past, sir, I, no clothes, that gent’man say, naked no good, dress this.”
“If you are a seaman”—our captain jerked his thumb aloft— “let’s see you lower this midmast’s royal.” At this, the stowaway grew hesitant & confused & I felt the lunatick’s wager I had placed on this Indian’s word swing against me, but Autua had merely spotted a trap. “Sir, this mast ain’t midmast, this mast the mizzen, aye?” Impassive Cpt. Molyneux nodded. “Then kindly lower the *mizzen* royal.”
Autua fairly ran up the mast & I began to hope all was not lost. The newly risen sun shone low over the water & caused us to squint. “Ready & aim my piece,” the captain instructed Mr. Boer-haave, once the stowaway was past the spanker gaff, “fire on my command!”
Now I protested with the utmost vigor, the Indian had received holy sacrament, but Cpt. Molyneux ordered me to shut up or swim back to the Chathams. No American captain would cut a man down, not even a nigger, so odiously! Autua reached the topmost yard & walked it with simian dexterity despite the rough seas. Watching the sail unfurl, one of the “saltest” aboard, a dour Icelander & a sober, obliging & hardworking fellow, spoke his admiration for all to hear. “The darkie’s salt as I am, aye, he’s got fishhooks for toes!” Such was my gratitude, I could have kissed his boots. Soon Autua had the sail down—a difficult operation even for a team of four men. Cpt. Molyneux grunted approval & ordered Mr. Boerhaave to replace his gun, “But d—— me if I pay a stowaway a single cent. He’ll work his passage to O-hawaii. If he’s no shirker he may sign articles there in the regular fashion. Mr. Roderick, he can share the dead Spaniard’s bunk.”

I have worn away a nib in narrating the day’s excitements. It is grown too dark to see.

Wednesday, 20th November-

Strong easterly breeze, very salty & oppressive. Henry has conducted his examination & has grave news, yet not the gravest. My Ailment is a parasite, *Gusano coco cervello*. This Worm is endemic throughout both Melanesia & Polynesia, but has been known to science only these last ten years. It breeds in the stinking canals of Batavia, doubtless the port of my own infection. Ingested, it voyages through the host’s blood vessels to the brain’s cerebellum anterior . (Hence my migraines & dizziness.) Ensconced in the brain, it enters a gestation phase. “You are a realist, Adam,” Henry told me, “so your pills shall be unsugared. Once the Parasite’s larvae hatch, the victim’s brain becomes a maggoty cauliflower. Putrescent gases cause the eardrums & eyeballs to protrude until they pop, releasing a cloud of *Gusano coco* spores.” Thus reads my death sentence, but now comes my stay of execution & appeal. An admixture of urussium alkali & orinoco manganese will calcify my Parasite & laphrydictic myrrh will disintegrate it. Henry’s “apothecary” holds these compounds, but a precise dosage is paramount. Less than half a drachm leaves *Gusano coco* unpurged, but more kills the patient with the cure. My doctor warns me that as the Parasite dies, its poison sacs split & secrete their cargo, so I shall feel worse before my recovery is compleat.
Henry enjoined me not to breathe a word about my condition, for hyenas like Boerhaave prey on the vulnerable & ignorant sailors can show hostility to maladies they know not. (“I once heard of a sailor who showed the touch of leprosy a week out of Macao on the long haul back to Lisbon,” recalled Henry, “and the whole company prodded the wretch overboard without a hearing.”) During my convalescence, Henry shall inform the “scuttlebutt” that Mr. Ewing has a low fever caused by the clime & nurse me himself. Henry bridled when I mentioned his fee.

“Fee? You are no valetudinarian viscount with banknotes padding his pillows! Providence steered you to my ministrations, for I doubt five men in this blue Pacific can cure you! So a fie on ‘Fee’! All I ask, dear Adam, is that you are an obedient patient! Kindly take my powders & withdraw to your cabin. I shall look in after the last dog.”
My doctor is an uncut diamond of the first water. Even as I write these words, I am tearful with gratitude.

Saturday, 30th November—

Henry’s powders are indeed a wondrous medicament. I inhale the precious grains into my nostrils from an ivory spoon & on the instant an incandescent joy burns my being. My senses grow alert, yet my limbs grow Lethean. My Parasite still writhes at night, like a new babe’s finger, igniting spasms of pain & dreams obscene & monstrous visit me. “A sure sign,” Henry consoles me, “your Worm has reacted to our vermicide & seeks shelter in the recesses of your cerebral canals whence visions spring. In vain *Gusano coco* hides, dear Adam, in vain. We shall winkle ’im out!”

Monday, 2nd December—

By day, my coffin is hot as an oven & my sweat dampens these pages. The tropic sun fattens & fills the noon sky. The men work seminaked with sun-blacked torsos & straw hats. The planking oozes scorching tar that sticks to one’s soles. Rain squalls blow up from nowhere & vanish with the same rapidity & the deck hisses itself dry in a minute. Portuguese man-o’-wars pulsate in the quicksilver sea, flying fish bewitch the beholder & ocher shadows of hammerheads circle the *Prophetess*. Earlier, I stepped on a squid that had propelled itself over the bulwarks! (Its eyes & beak reminded me of my father-in-law.) The water we took on at Chatham Isle is now brackish & without a dash of brandy in it, my stomach rebels. When not playing chess in Henry’s cabin or the mess room, I rest in my coffin until Homer lulls me into dreams a-billow with sails of Athenians.
Autua knocked on my coffin door yesterday to thank me for saving his neck. He said he was in my debt (true enough) until the day he saves *my* life (may it never dawn!). I asked how he was finding his new duties. “Better’n slaving for Kupaka, Missa Ewing.” Anyhow, growing sensible of my fear someone would witness our congress & report to Cpt. Molyneux, the Moriori returned to the fo’c’sle & has not since sought me out. As Henry warns me, “It’s one thing to throw a blackie a bone, but quite another to take him on for life! Friendships between races, Ewing, can never surpass the affection between a loyal gundog & its master.”
Nightly, my doctor & I enjoy a stroll on the deck before retiring. It is pleasant merely to breathe the cooler air. One loses one’s eye in lanes of sea phosphorescence & the Mississippi of stars streaming across the heavens. Last night, the men were gathered on the foredeck laying up grass into sinnet for ropes by lantern light & the prohibition on “supernuminaries” on the foredeck seemed not to apply. (Since the “Autua Incident” that contempt directed at “Mr. Quillcock” is in recess, as is the epithet.) Bentnail sang ten verses on the world’s brothels foul enough to put the most wanton satyr to flight. Henry volunteered an eleventh verse (about Mary O’Hairy of Inverary) that turned the air yet bluer. Rafael was next coerced to take his turn. He sat on the “widow maker” & sang these lines in a voice unschooled yet honest & true:
—

Oh, Shenandoah, I long to see you,
Hurrah, you rolling river.
Oh, Shenandoah, I'll not deceive you,
We're bound way 'cross the wide Missouri.
Oh, Shenandoah, I love your daughter,
I love the place across the water.
The ship sails free, the wind is blowing,
The braces taut, the sheets a-flowing.
Missouri, she's a mighty river,
We'll brace her up till her topsails shiver.
Oh, Shenandoah, I'll leave you never,
Till the day I die, I'll love you ever.

Silence from rude mariners is a grander accolade than any erudite eulogy Why should Rafael, an Australian-born lad, have an American song by heart? "I din't know 'twas a Yankee un," he replied awkwardly. "My mam teached it me before she died. It's the only thing of hers I got still. It stuck in me." He turned to his work, an awkward curtness in his manner. Henry & I sensed anew the hostility that workers emanate at the bystanding idler & so we left the toilers to their industry.

Reading my entry for 15th October, when first I met Rafael during our shared mal de mer on the Tasman Sea, I stand amazed at how that sprite lad, aglow with excitement at his maiden voyage & so eager to please, has become this sullen youth in only six weeks. His luminous beauty is chipped away, revealing the timber-muscled seaman he shall become. Already he looks rather given to rum & water. Henry says this "sloughing off of his cocoon" is inevitable, *bon gré mal gré,* & I suppose he is right. Those smatterings of education & sensibility Rafael received from his patron, Mrs. Fry of Brisbane, serve a cabin boy ill in the harum-scarum world of the fo'c'sle. How I wish *I* could help him! Were it not for the intervention of my Mr. & Mrs. Channing, my own fate may well have been of a piece with Raf's. I asked Finbar if he thought the boy was "fitting in well." Finbar's Delphic reply, "Fitting *what* in well, Mr. Ewing?" left the galley cackling but myself quite in the dark.

Saturday, 7th December—

Petrels are aloft, sooty terns afloat & Mother Careys chickens roost on the rigging. Fish similar to borettoes pursued fish similar to sprats. As Henry & I ate supper, a blizzard of purplish moths seemed to issue from the cracks in the moon, smothering lanterns, faces, food & every surface in a twitching sheet of wings. To confirm these portents of nearby islands, the man at the lead shouted a depth of only eighteen fathoms. Mr. Boerhaave ordered the anchor to be weighed lest we drift onto a reef in the night.

The whites of my eyes have a lemon-yellow aspect & their rims are reddened & sore. Henry assures me this symptom is welcome, but has obliged my request for an increased dosage of vermicide.

Sunday, 8th December-Sabbath not being observed on the *Prophetess,* this morning Henry & I decided to conduct a short Bible Reading in his cabin in the "low-church" style of Ocean Bay's congregation, "astraddle" the forenoon & morning watches so both starboard & port shifts might

* My father never spoke to me of the dendroglyphs & I learnt of them only in the manner described in the Introduction. Now that the Moriori of Chatham Island are a race over extinction's brink, I hold them to be beyond betrayal. —J.E.

LETTERS FROM ZEDELGHEM

CHATEAU ZEDELGHEM,
NEERBEKE,
WEST VLAANDEREN

29TH-VI-1993

Sixsmith,
Dreamt I stood in a china shop so crowded from floor to far-off ceiling with shelves of porcelain antiquities etc. that moving a muscle would cause several to fall and smash to bits. Exactly what happened, but instead of a crashing noise, an august chord rang out, half-cello, half-celeste, D major (?), held for four beats. My wrist knocked a Ming vase affair off its pedestal—E-flat, whole string section, glorious, transcendent, angels wept. Deliberately now, smashed a figurine of an ox for the next note, then a milkmaid, then Saturdays Child—orgy of shrapnel filled the air, divine harmonies my head. Ah, such music! Glimpsed my father totting up the smashed items' value, nib flashing, but *had* to keep the music coming. Knew I'd become the greatest composer of the century if I could only make this music mine. A monstrous Laughing Cavalier flung against the wall set off a thumping battery of percussion. Woke in my Imperial Western suite, Tam Brewer's collectors nearly knocking my door down and much commotion from corridor. Hadn't even waited until I'd shaved—breathtaking vulgarity of these ruffians. Had no choice but to exit swiftly via the bathroom window before the brouhaha summoned the manager to discover that the young gentleman in Room 237 had no means of settling his now-hefty balance. Escape was not hitchless, sorry to report. Drainpipe ripped free of its mounting with the noise of a brutalized violin, and down, down, down tumbled your old chum. Right buttock one hellish bruise. Minor miracle I didn't shatter my spine or impale myself on railings. Learn from this, Sixsmith. When insolvent, pack minimally, with a valise tough enough to be thrown onto a London pavement from a first- or second-floor window. Insist on hotel rooms no higher. Hid in a tearoom tucked into a sooty nook of Victoria Station, trying to transcribe the music from the china shop of dreams—couldn't get beyond a measly two bars. Would have walked into Tam Brewer's arms just to have that music back again. Miserable spirits. Laboring types surrounded me with bad teeth,

parrot voices, and unfounded optimism. Sobering to think how one accursed night of baccarat can alter a man's social standing so irreversibly. Those shopworkers, cabbies, and tradesmen had more half crowns and threepenny bits squirreled away in their sour Stepney mattresses than I, Son of an Ecclesiastical Somebody, can claim. Had a view of an alley: downtrodden scriveners hurtling by like demisemiquavers in a Beethovian *allegro*. Afraid of 'em? No, I'm afraid of *being* one. What value are education, breeding, and talent if one doesn't have a pot to piss in?

Still can't believe it. I, a Caius Man, teetering on the brink of destitution. Decent hotels won't let me taint their lobbies now. Indecent hotels demand cash on the nail. Am barred from any reputable gaming table this side of the Pyrenees. Anyway, I summarized my options:—

(i) Use paltry funds to obtain a dirty room in some lodging house, beg a few guineas from Uncle Cecil Ltd., teach prissy missies their scales and bitter spinsters their technique. Come now. If I could fake courtesy to dunces I'd still be swabbing Professor Mac-kerras's arse with my ex–fellow undergrads. No, before you say it, I *can't* go running back to Pater with yet another cri de cœur. Would validate every poisonous word he said about me. Would rather jump off Waterloo Bridge and let Old Father Thames humble me. Mean it.

(ii) Hunt down Caius people, butter 'em up, and invite myself to stay for the summer. Problematic, for same reasons as (i). How long could I conceal my starving pocketbook? How long could I stave off their pity their talons?

(iii) Visit turf accountant—but if I lost?

Youd remind me I brought it all upon myself, Sixsmith, but shrug off that middle-class chip on your shoulder and stick with me a little longer. Across a crowded platform, a guard announced that the Dover-bound train for the ship to Ostend was delayed by thirty minutes. That guard was my croupier, inviting me to double or quits. If one will just be still, shut up, and *listen*—lo, behold, the world'll sift through one's ideas for one, esp. in a grimy London railway station. Downed my soapy tea and strode across the concourse to the ticket office. A return ticket to Ostend was too costly—so parlous has my position become—so a single it had to be. Boarded my carriage just as the locomotive's whistle blasted forth a swarm of piccolo Furies. We were under way

Now to reveal my plan, inspired by a piece in *The Times* and a long soak's daydream in my Savoy suite. In the Belgian backwaters, south of Bruges, there lives a reclusive English composer, named Vyvyan Ayrs. You won't have heard of him because you're a musical oaf, but he's one of the greats. The only Briton of his generation to reject pomp, circumstance, rusticity and charm. Hasn't produced any new work since the early twenties due to illness—he's half blind and can hardly hold a pen—but the *Times* review of his *Secular Magnificat* (performed last week at St. Martin's) referred to a drawerful of unfinished works. My daydream had me traveling to Belgium, persuading Vyvyan Ayrs he needed to employ me as an amanuensis, accepting his offer to tutor me, shooting through the musical firmament, winning fame and fortune commensurate to my gifts, obliging Pater to admit that, yes, the son he disinherited is *the* Robert Frobisher, greatest British composer of his time.

Why not? Had no better plan. You groan and shake your head, Sixsmith, I know, but you smile too, which is why I love you. Uneventful journey to the Channel … cancerous suburbs, tedious farmland, soiled Sussex. Dover an utter fright staffed by Bolsheviks, versified cliffs as Romantic as my arse and a similar hue. Changed last shillings into francs at the port and took my cabin aboard the *Kentish Queen,* a rusty tub that looks old enough to have seen service in Crimea. Spud-faced young steward and I disagreed his burgundy uniform and unconvincing beard were worth a tip. Sneered at my valise and manuscript folder—"Wise of you to travel light, sir"—and left me to muck for myself. Suited me fine.

Dinner was balsawood chicken, powdery potatoes, and a bastard claret. My dining-table

companion was Mr. Victor Bryant, cutlery lordling of Sheffield. Not a musical bone in his body He expounded on the subject of spoons for most of the meal, mistook my civil deportment for interest, and offered me a job in his sales department on the spot! Can you believe it? Thanked him (keeping straight face) and confessed I'd rather swallow cutlery than ever have to sell the stuff. Three mighty blasts on the foghorn, engines changed timbre, felt the ship cast off, went on deck to watch Albion withdraw into drizzly murk. No going back now; consequences of what Id done struck home. R.VW conducted *Sea Symphony* in the Orchestra of the Mind, "Sail forth, steer for the deep waters only, Reckless, O Soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me." (Don't much care for this work, but it was perfectly programmed.) North Sea wind had me shivering, spray licked me from toe to crown. Glossy black waters invited me to jump. Ignored 'em. Turned in early, leafed through Noyes's *Contrapuntals,* listened to the distant brass of the engine room and sketched a repetitive passage for trombone based on the ship's rhythms, but was rather rubbish, and then guess who came a-knocking at my door? The spud-faced steward, his shift over. Gave him rather more than a tip. No Adonis, scrawny but inventive for his class. Turfed him out afterwards and sank into the sleep of the dead. One part of me wanted that voyage never to end.

But end it did. *Kentish Queen* slid into Dover's snaggletoothed twin sister over the mucky water, Ostend, the Lady of Dubious Virtue. Early early morning, Europe's snoring rumbled deep below bass tubas. Saw my first aboriginal Belgians, hauling crates, arguing, and *thinking* in Flemish, Dutch, whatever. Packed my valise sharpish, afraid the ship might sail back to England with me still aboard; or, rather, afraid of my letting this happen. Grabbed a bite from the first-class galleys fruit bowl and dashed down the gangplank before anyone with braiding on his uniform caught up with me. Set foot on Continental macadam and asked a Customs man where I might find the railway station. He pointed toward a groaning tram packed with malnourished workmen, rickets, and penury Preferred shank's pony, drizzle or no drizzle. Followed tramlines down coffinesque streets. Ostend is all tapioca grays and stained browns. Will admit, I was thinking Belgium was a b. stupid country to run away to. Bought a ticket for Bruges and hauled myself aboard the next train—no platforms, can you believe it?—a decrepit, empty train. Moved compartment because mine smelt unpleasant, but all compartments had same pong. Smoked cigarettes cadged off Victor Bryant to purify the air. The stationmaster's whistle blew on time, the locomotive strained like a gouty proctor on the pot before heaving itself into motion. Soon steaming through a foggy landscape of unkempt dikes and blasted copses at a fair old clip.

If my plan bears fruit, Sixsmith, you may come to Bruges before v. long. When you do, arrive in that six o'clock in the morning *gnossl-ennesque* hour. Lose yourself in the city's rickety streets, blind canals, wrought-iron gates, uninhabited courtyards—may I go on? Why, thank you—leery Gothic carapaces, Ararat roofs, shrubbery-tufted brick spires, medieval overhangs, laundry sagging from windows, cobbled whirlpools that suck your eye in, clockwork princes and chipped princesses striking their hours, sooty doves, and three or four octaves of bells, some sober, some bright. Aroma of fresh bread led me to a bakery where a deformed woman with no nose sold me a dozen crescent-moon pastries. Only wanted one, but thought she had enough problems. A rag-and-bone cart clattered out of the mist and its toothless driver spoke companionably to me, but I could only reply, "Excusez-moi, je ne parle pas flamand," which made him laugh like the Goblin King. Gave him a pastry. His filthy hand was a scabby claw. In a poor quarter (alleys stank of effluent), children helped their mothers at the pumps, filling broken jugs with brown water. Finally, the excitement all caught up with me, sat on the steps of a dying windmill for a breather, wrapped myself against the damp, fell asleep.

Next thing, a witch was poking me awake with her broomstick, screeching something like "Zie gie doad misschien?" but don't quote me. Blue sky, warm sun, not a wisp of fog to be seen.

Resurrected and blinking, I offered her a pastry. She accepted with distrust, put it in her apron for later, and got back to her sweeping, growling an ancient ditty Lucky I wasn't robbed, I suppose. Shared another pastry with five thousand pigeons, to the envy of a beggar, so I had to give him one too. Walked back the way I might have come. In an odd pentagonal window a creamy maiden was arranging Saintpaulia in a cut-glass bowl. Girls fascinate in different ways. Try 'em one day. Tapped on the pane, and asked in French if she'd save my life by falling in love with me. Shook her head but got an amused smile. Asked where I could find a police station. She pointed over a crossroads. One can spot a fellow musician in any context, even amongst policemen. The craziest-eyed, unruliest-haired one, either hungry-skinny or jovial-portly This French-speaking, cor anglais–playing, local operatic society–belonging inspector had heard of Vyvyan Ayrs and kindly drew me a map to Neerbeke. Paid him two pastries for this intelligence. He asked if I had shipped over my British car—his son was mad keen about Austins. Said I had no car. This worried him. How would I get to Neerbeke? No bus, no trainline, and twenty-five miles was the devil of a walk. Asked if I could borrow a policeman's bicycle for an indefinite period. Told me that was most irregular. Assured him *I* was most irregular, and outlined the nature of my mission to Ayrs, Belgium's most famous adopted son (must be so few that might even be true), in the service of European music. Repeated my request. Implausible truth can serve one better than plausible fiction, and now was such a time. The honest sergeant took me to a compound where lost items await rightful owners for a few months (before finding their way to the black market)—but first, he wanted my opinion on his baritone. He gave me a burst of "Recitar! … Vesti la giubba!" from *I Pagliacci*. (Pleasant enough voice in lower registers, but his breathing needed work and his vibrato quivered like a backstage thunder board.) Gave a few musical pointers; received the loan of a Victorian Enfield plus cord to secure valise and folder to the saddle and rear mudguard. He wished me *bon voyage* and fair weather.

Adrian would never have marched along the road I bicycled out of Bruges (too deep in Hun territory) but nonetheless felt an affinity with my brother by virtue of breathing the same air of the same land. The Plain is flat as the Fens but in a bad shape. Along the way I fueled myself with the last pastries and stopped at impoverished cottages for cups of water. Nobody said much, but nobody said no. Thanks to a headwind and a chain that kept slipping off, the afternoon was growing old before I finally reached Ayrs's home village of Neerbeke. A silent blacksmith showed me how to get to Château Zedelghem by elaborating my map with a pencil stub. A lane with harebells and toadflax growing in the middle led me past a deserted lodge house to a once stately avenue of mature Italian poplars. Zedelghem is grander than our rectory, some crumbly turrets adorn its west wing, but it couldn't hold a candle to Audley End or Capon-Tench's country seat. Spied a girl riding a horse over a low hill crowned by a shipwrecked beech tree. Passed a gardener spreading soot against the slugs in a vegetable garden. In the forecourt, a muscle-bound valet was decoking a Cowley Flat Nose. Seeing my approach, he rose and waited for me. In a terraced corner of this frieze, a man in a wheelchair sat under foamy wisteria listening to the wireless. Vyvyan Ayrs, I presumed. The easy part of my daydream was over.

Leant the bicycle against the wall, told the valet I had business with his master. He was civil enough, and led me around to Ayrs's terrace, and announced my arrival in German. Ayrs a husk of a man, as if his illness has sucked all juice out of him, but stopped myself kneeling on the cinder path like Sir Percival before King Arthur. Our overture proceeded more or less like this. "Good afternoon, Mr. Ayrs."

"Who in hell are *you?"*

"It's a great honor to—"

"I said, 'Who in hell *are* you?' "

"Robert Frobisher, sir, from Saffron Walden. I am—I was— a student of Sir Trevor Mackerras at Caius College, and I've come all the way from London to—"
"All the way from London on a bicycle?"
"No. I borrowed the bicycle from a policeman in Bruges."
"Did you?" Pause for thought. "Must have taken hours."
"A labor of love, sir. Like pilgrims climbing hills on their knees."
"What balderdash is this?"
"I wished to prove I'm a serious applicant."
"Serious applicant for what?"
"The post of your amanuensis."
"Are you mad?"
Always a trickier question than it looks. "I doubt it."
"Look here, I've not advertised for an amanuensis!"
"I know, sir, but you need one, even if you don't know it yet. The *Times* piece said that you're unable to compose new works because of your illness. I can't allow your music to be lost. It's far, far too precious. So I'm here to offer you my services."
Well, he didn't dismiss me out of hand. "What did you say your name was?" I told him. "One of Mackerras's shooting stars, are you?"
"Frankly, sir, he loathed me."
As you've learned to your cost, I can be intriguing when I put my mind to it.
"He did, did he? Why might that be?"
"I called his sixth Concerto for Flute"—I cleared my throat— " 'a slave of prepubescent Saint-Saëns at his most florid' in the college magazine. He took it personally."
"You wrote *that* about Mackerras?" Ayrs wheezed as if his ribs were being sawed. "I'll *bet* he took it personally"
The sequel is short. The valet showed me into a drawing room decorated in eggshell green, a dull Farquharson of sheep and cornstooks, and a not-very-good Dutch landscape. Ayrs summoned his wife, Mrs. van Outryve de Crommelynck. She kept her own name, and with a name like that who can blame her? The lady of the house was coolly courteous and inquired into my background. Answered truthfully, though I veiled my expulsion from Caius behind an obscure malady Of my present financial straits I breathed not a word—the more desperate the case, the more reluctant the donor. Charmed 'em sufficiently It was agreed I could at least stay the night at Zedelghem. Ayrs would put me through my musical paces in the morning, permitting a decision on my proposal.
Ayrs did not appear at dinner, however. My arrival coincided with the start of a fortnightly migraine, which confines him to his rooms for a day or two. My audition is postponed until he is better, so my fate still hangs in the balance. On the credit side, the Pies-porter and lobster à l'américaine were the equal to anything at the Imperial. Encouraged my hostess to talk—think she was flattered at how much I know about her illustrious husband, and sensed my genuine love of his music. Oh, we ate with Ayrs's daughter, too, the young equestrienne I'd glimpsed earlier. Mlle. Ayrs is a horsey creature of seventeen with her mama's retroussé nose. Couldn't get a civil word out of her all evening. Might she see in me a louche English freeloader down on his luck, here to lure her sickly father into a glorious Indian summer where she can't follow and isn't welcome?
People are complicated.
Gone midnight. The château is sleeping, so must I.

Sincerely,

R.F.

…

ZEDELGHEM
6TH—VII—1931

A telegram, Sixsmith? You *ass*.
Don't send any more, I beg you—telegrams attract attention! Yes, I'm still Abroad, yes, safe from Brewer's knuckle men. Fold my parents' mortifying letter into a paper boat and sail it down the Cam. Pater's only "concerned" because my creditors are shaking him to see if any banknotes drop from the family tree. Debts of a disinherited son, however, are nobody's business but the son's— believe me, I've looked into the legalities. Mater is not "frantic." Only the prospect of the decanter running dry could make Mater frantic.
My audition took place in Ayrs's music room, after lunch, the day before yesterday. Not an overwhelming success, putting it mildly—no knowing how many days I'll be here, or how few. Admit to a certain frisson sitting on Vyvyan Ayrs's own piano stool beforehand. This Oriental rug, battered divan, Breton cupboards crammed with music stands, Bösendorfer grand, carillon, all witnessed the conception and birth of *Matryoshka Doll Variations* and his song cycle *Society Islands*. Stroked the same 'cello who first vibrated to *Untergehen Violinkonzert*. Hearing Hendrick wheeling his master this way, I stopped snooping and faced the doorway. Ayrs ignored my "I do hope you're recovered, Mr. Ayrs" and had his valet leave him facing the garden window. "Well?" he asked, after we'd been alone half a minute. "Go on. Impress me." Asked what he wanted to hear. "I must select the program, too? Well, have you mastered 'Three Blind Mice'?"
So I sat at the Bösendorfer and played the syphilitic crank "Three Blind Mice," after the fashion of a mordant Prokofiev. Ayrs did not comment. Continued in a subtler vein with Chopin's Nocturne in F Major. He interrupted with a whine, "Trying to slip my petticoats off my ankles, Frobisher?" Played VA.'s own *Digressions on a Theme of Lodovico Roncalli,* but before the first two bars were out, he'd uttered a six-birch expletive, banged on the floor with his cane, and said, "Self-gratification makes you go blind, didn't they teach you that at Caius?" Ignored him and finished the piece *note perfect*. For a finale of fireworks, gambled on Scarlatti's 212th in A major, a bête noire of arpeggios and acrobatics. Came unstuck once or twice, but I wasn't being auditioned as a concert soloist. After I'd finished, VA. kept swinging his head to the rhythm of the disappeared *sonata;* or maybe he was conducting the blurry, swaying poplars. "Execrable, Frobisher, get out of my house this instant!" would have aggrieved but not much surprised me. Instead, he admitted, "You *may* have the makings of a musician. It's a nice day. Amble over to the lake and see the ducks. I need, oh, a little *time* to decide whether or not I can find a use for your … gifts."
Left without a word. The old goat wants me, it seems, but only if I'm pathetic with gratitude. If my pocketbook had allowed me to go, I'd have hired a cab back to Bruges and renounced the whole errant idea. He called after me, "Some advice, Frobisher, gratis. Scarlatti was a

harpsichordist, not a pianist. Don't drench him in color so, and don't use the pedal to sustain notes you can't sustain with the fingers." I called back that I needed, oh, a little *time* to decide whether or not I could find a use for Ayrs's … gift.

Crossed the courtyard, where a beetroot-faced gardener was clearing a weed-choked fountain. Made him understand I wanted to speak to his mistress and pronto—he is not the sharpest tool in the shed—and he waved vaguely toward Neerbeke, miming a steering wheel. Wonderful. What now? See the ducks, why not? Could strangle a brace and leave 'em hanging in VA.'s wardrobe. Mood was that black. So I mimed ducks and asked the gardener, "Where?" He pointed at the beech tree, and his gesture said, Walk that way, just on the other side. I set off, jumped a neglected ha-ha, but before I'd reached the crest, the noise of galloping bore down on me, and Miss Eva van Outryve de Crommelynck—from now plain old Crommelynck shall have to do or I'll run out of ink—rode up on her black pony.

I greeted her. She cantered around me like Queen Boadicea, pointedly unresponsive. "How humid the air is today," I small-talked sarcastically. "I rather think we shall have rain later, wouldn't you agree?" She said nothing. "Your dressage is more polished than your manners," I told her. Nothing. Shooting guns crackled across the fields, and Eva reassured her mount. Her mount is a beaut—one can't blame the horse. I asked Eva for the pony's name. She stroked back some black, corkscrew locks from her cheeks. "J'ai nommé le poney Néfertiti, d'après cette reine d'Egypte qui m'est si chère," she replied and turned away "It speaks!" I cried and watched the girl gallop off until she was a miniature in the Van Dyck pastoral. Fired artillery shells after her in elegant parabolas. Turned my guns on Château Zedelghem and pounded Ayrs's wing to smoking rubble. Remembered what country we are in and stopped.

Past the sundered beech, the meadow falls away to an ornamental lake, ringing with frogs. Seen better days. A precarious footbridge connects an island to the shore, and flamingo lilies bloom in vast numbers. Now and then goldfish splish and gleam like new pennies dropped in water. Whiskered mandarin ducks honk for bread, exquisitely tailored beggars—rather like myself. Martins nest in a boathouse of tarred boards. Under a row of pear trees—once an orchard?—I laid me down and idled, an art perfected during my long convalescence. An idler and a sluggard are as different as a gourmand and a glutton. Watched the aerial bliss of coupled dragonflies. Even heard their wings, an ecstatic sound like paper flaps in bicycle spokes. Gazed on a slowworm exploring a miniature Amazonia around the roots where I lay. Silent? Not altogether, no. Was woken much later, by first spots of rain. Cumu-lonimbi were reaching critical mass. Sprinted back to Zedelghem as fast as I'll ever run again, just to hear the rushing roar in my ear canals and feel the first fat droplets pound my face like xylophone hammers.

Just had time to change into my one clean shirt before the dinner gong. Mrs. Crommelynck apologized, her husband's appetite was still feeble and demoiselle preferred to eat alone. Nothing suited me better. Stewed eel, chervil sauce, the rain skittering on terrace. Unlike the Frobishery and most English homes I have known, meals at the château are not conducted in silence, and Mme. C told me a little about her family. Crommelyncks have lived at Zedelghem since far-off days when Bruges was Europe's busiest seaport (so she told me, hard to credit), making Eva the crowning glory of six centuries' breeding. Warmed to the woman somewhat, I admit it. She holds forth like a man and smokes myrrhy cigarettes through a rhino-horn holder. She'd notice pretty sharpish if any valuables were spirited away, however. They've suffered from thieving servants in the past, she happened to mention, even one or two impoverished houseguests, if I could believe people could behave so dishonorably. Assured her my parents had suffered the same way, and put out feelers re: my audition. "He *did* describe your Scarlatti as 'salvageable.' Vyvyan spurns praise, both giving and receiving it. He says, 'If people praise you, you're not walking your own path.' " Asked directly if she thought he'd agree to take me on. "I do hope so, Robert." (In other words, wait and see.) "You must understand, he resigned

himself never to compose another note. Doing so caused him great pain. Resurrecting hope that he might compose again—well, that's not a risk to be undertaken lightly." Subject closed. I mentioned my earlier encounter with Eva, and Mme. C pronounced, "My daughter was uncivil."

"Reserved" was my perfect reply.

My hostess topped up my glass. "Eva has a disagreeable nature. My husband has taken very little interest in rearing her like a young lady. He never wanted children. Fathers and daughters are reputed to dote on each other, are they not? Not here. Her teachers say Eva is studious but secretive, and she's never tried to develop herself musically I often feel I don't know her at all." I filled Mme. C.'s glass, and she seemed to cheer up. "Listen to me, lamenting. Your sisters are immaculately mannered English roses, I am sure, Monsieur?" Rather doubt her interest in the Frobishery's memsahibs was genuine, but the woman likes to watch me talk, so I painted witty caricatures of my estranged clan for my hostess's amusement. Made us all sound so gay, almost felt homesick.

This morning, a Monday, Eva deigned to share breakfast— Bradenham ham, eggs, bread, all sorts—but the girl spouted petty complaints to her mother and snuffed my interjections out with a flat *oui* or a sharp *non*. Ayrs was feeling better so ate with us. Hen-drick then drove the daughter off to Bruges for another week at school—Eva boards in the city with a family whose daughters also attend her school, the Van Eels or some such. Whole château breathed a relieved sigh when the Cowley had cleared the poplar avenue (known as the Monk's Walk). Eva does so poison the air of the place. At nine, Ayrs and I adjourned to the music room. "I've got a little melody for viola rattling about my head, Frobisher. Let's see if you can get it down." Was delighted to hear it, as I'd expected to start at the shallow end—tidying up sketchy MSS into best copy and so forth. If I proved my worth as VA.'s sentient fountain pen on my first day, my tenure would be well-nigh assured. Sat at his desk, sharpened 2B at the ready, clean MS, waiting for him to name the notes, one by one. Suddenly, the man bellowed: " 'Tar, tar! Tar-tartar tattytattytatty tar!' Got that? 'Tar! Tatty-tar! Quiet part—tartar-tar-tttt-TAR! TARTARTAR!!!'" Got that? Old ass obviously thought this was amusing—one could no more notate his shouted garble than one could score the braying of a dozen donkeys—but after another thirty seconds, it dawned on me this was no joke. Tried to interrupt, but the man was so engrossed in his music making that he didn't notice. Sunk into deepest misery while Ayrs carried on, and on, and on … My scheme was hopeless. What had I been thinking about at Victoria Station? Dejected, I let him work through his piece in the lean hope that having it complete in his head might make it easier to duplicate later.

"There, finished!" he proclaimed. "Got it? Hum it back, Frobisher, and then let's see how it sounds."

Asked what key we were in. "B-flat, *of course!"* Time signature? Ayrs pinched the bridge of his nose. "Are you saying you've lost my melody?" Struggled to remind myself he was being totally unreasonable. I asked him to repeat the melody *much* more slowly and to label his notes, one by one. There was an acute pause that felt about three hours long while Ayrs decided whether or not to throw a tantrum. In the end, he released a martyred sigh. *"Four-eight,* changing to *eight*-eight after the twelfth bar, if you can count that far." Pause. Remembered my monetary difficulties and bit my lip. "Let's go all the way back, then." Patronizing pause. "Ready now? *Slowly* … Tar! What note is that?" Got through a hideous half hour with me guessing every single note, one by one. Ayrs verified or rejected my guess with a weary nod or shake of the head. Mme. C carried in a vase of flowers and I made an SOS face, but VA. himself declared that we call it a day. As I fled, I heard Ayrs pronounce (for my benefit?), "It is desperate, Jocasta, the boy cannot take down a simple tune. I might as well join the avant-garde and throw darts at pieces of paper with notes written on 'em."

Down the passageway Mrs. Willems—housekeeper—laments the damp, blustery weather and her wet laundry to some unseen underling. She's better off than I am. I've manipulated people for advancement, lust, or loans, but never for the roof over my head. This rotting château stinks of mushrooms and mold. Should never have come here.

Sincerely,

R.F.

P.S. Financial "embarrassment," what an apposite phrase. No wonder the poor are all socialists. Look, must ask you for a loan. The regime at Zedelghem is the laxest I ever saw (fortunately! My father's butler's wardrobe is better supplied than my own at present), but one needs to set some standards. Can't even tip the servants. If I had any wealthy friends left, I'd ask 'em, but truth is I don't. Don't know how you wire money or telegram it or send it in packets or whatever, but you're the scientist, you find a way. If Ayrs asks me to leave, I'll be scuppered. The news would seep back to Cambridge that Robert Frobisher had to beg money from his erstwhile hosts when they threw him out for not being up to the job. The shame would kill me, Sixsmith, it truly would. For God's sake send whatever you can immediately.

…

CHATEAU ZEDELGHEM

14.TH—vii—1931

Sixsmith,

All praise Rufus the Blessed, Patron Saint of Needy Composers, Praise in the Highest, *Amen*. Your postal order arrived safe and sound this morning—I painted you to my hosts as a doting uncle whod forgotten my birthday. Mrs. Crommelynck confirms a bank in Bruges will cash it. Will write a motet in your honor and pay your money back soon as I can. Might be sooner than you expect. The deep freeze on my prospects is thawing. After my humiliating first attempt at collaboration with Ayrs, I returned to my room in abject wretchedness. That afternoon I spent writing my sniveling lament to you—burn it, by the way, if you haven't already—feeling v. anxious about the future. Braved the rain in Wellington boots and a cape and walked to the post office in the village, wondering, frankly, where I might be a month from now. Mrs. Willems bonged the gong for dinner shortly after my return, but when I got to the dining hall, Ayrs was waiting, alone. "That you, Frobisher?" he asked, with the gruffness habitual to older men trying to do delicacy. "Ah, Frobisher, glad we can have this little chat alone. Look, I was rotten to you this morning. My illness makes me more … direct than is sometimes appropriate. I apologize. Give this cantankerous so-and-so another chance tomorrow, what d'you say?"

Had his wife told him what state she'd found me in? Had Lucille mentioned my half-packed

valise? Waited until I was sure my voice was purged of relief and told him, nobly, nothing was wrong in speaking his mind.

"I've been far too negative about your proposal, Frobisher. It won't be easy extracting music out of my noddle, but our partnership stands as good a chance as any Your musicianship and character seem more than up to the job. My wife tells me you even try your hand at composition? Plainly, music is oxygen for us both. With the right will, we'll muddle along until we hit upon the right method." At this, Mme. Crommelynck knocked, peered in, sensed the room's weather in a trice the way some women do, and asked if a celebratory drink was called for. Ayrs turned to me. "That depends on young Frobisher here. What d'you say? Will you stay for a few weeks, with a view to a few months, if all goes well? Maybe longer, who knows? But you must accept a small salary."

Let my relief show as pleasure, told him I'd be honored, and did not out of hand reject the offer of a salary.

"Then, Jocasta, tell Mrs. Willems to fetch a Pinot Rouge 1908!" We toasted Bacchus and the Muses, and drank a wine rich as unicorn's blood. Ayrs's cellar, some twelve hundred bottles, is one of the finest in Belgium, and worth a brief digression. It survived the war unlooted by the Hun officers who used Zedelghem as a command post, all thanks to a false wall Hendrick's father built over its entrance before the family's flight to Gothenburg. The library, and various other bulky treasures, also spent the war down there (used to be the vaults of a monastery), sealed up in crates. The Prussians ransacked the building before Armistice, but they never rumbled the cellar.

A work routine is developing. Ayrs and I are in the music room by nine o'clock every morning his various ailments and pains let him. I sit at the piano, Ayrs on the divan, smoking his vile Turkish cigarettes, and we adopt one of our three modi operandi. "Revisionals"— he asks me to run through the previous morning's work. I hum, sing, or play, depending on the instrument, and Ayrs modifies the score. "Reconstitutionals" have me sifting through old scores, notebooks, and compositions, some written before I was born, to locate a passage or cadenza Ayrs dimly remembers and wants to salvage. Great detective work. "Compositionals" are the most demanding. I sit at the piano and try to keep up with a flow of "Semiquaver, B-G; semibreve, A-flat—hold it four beats, no, six—crotchets! F-sharp— no no no no *F-sharp*— and … B! Tar-tatty-tatty-tarrr!" *(il maestro* will at least name his notes now.) Or, if he's feeling more poetic, it might be "Now, Frobisher, the clarinet is the concubine, the violas are yew trees in the cemetery, the clavichord is the moon, so … let the east wind blow that A minor chord, sixteenth bar onwards."

Like that of a good butler (although you can be sure, I am better than good), my job is nine-tenths anticipation. Sometimes Ayrs will ask for an artistic judgment, something like "D'you think this chord works, Frobisher?" or "Is this passage in keeping with the whole?" If I say no, Ayrs asks me what I'd suggest as a substitute, and once or twice he's even used my amendment. Quite sobering. People in the future will be studying this music.

By one o'clock Ayrs is spent. Hendrick carries him down to the dining room, where Mrs. Crommelynck joins us for luncheon, and the dreaded E., if she's back for the w/end or a half holiday. Ayrs naps through the afternoon heat. I continue to sift the library for treasure, compose in the music room, read manuscripts in the garden (Madonna lilies, crowns imperial, red-hot pokers, hollyhocks, all blooming bright), navigate lanes around Neerbeke on the bicycle, or ramble across local fields. Am firm friends with the village dogs. They gallop after me like the Pied Piper's rats or brats. The locals return my *"Goede morgen"* and *"Goede middag"*—I'm now known as the long-term guest up at the *"kasteel."*

After supper, the three of us might listen to the wireless if there is a broadcast that passes muster, otherwise it will be recordings on the gramophone (an His Master's Voice table model

in an oak box), usually of Ayrs's own major works conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham. When we have visitors, there will be conversation or a little chamber music. Other nights, Ayrs likes me to read him poetry, especially his beloved Keats. He whispers the verses as I recite, as if his voice is leaning on mine. At breakfast, he has me read from *The Times*. Old, blind, and sick as Ayrs is, he could hold his own in a college debating society, though I notice he rarely proposes alternatives for the systems he ridicules. "Liberality? Timidity in the rich!" "Socialism? The younger brother of a decrepit despotism, which it wants to succeed" "Conservatives? Adventitious liars, whose doctrine of free will is their greatest deception." What sort of state *does* he want? "None! The better organized the state, the duller its humanity"

Irascible as Ayrs is, he's one of few men in Europe whose influence I want my own creativity informed by. Musicologically he's Janus-headed. One Ayrs looks back to Romanticism's deathbed, the other looks to the future. This is the Ayrs whose gaze I follow. Watching him use counterpoint and mix colors refines my own language in exciting ways. Already, my short time at Zedelghem has taught me more than three years at the throne of Mackerras the Jackass with his Merry Band of Onanists.

Friends of Ayrs and Mrs. Crommelynck regularly visit. On an average week, we can expect visitor/s two or three nights. Soloists returning from Brussels, Berlin, Amsterdam, or beyond; acquaintances from Ayrs's salad days in Florida or Paris; and good old Morty Dhondt and Wife. Dhondt owns a diamond workshop in both Bruges and Antwerp, speaks a hazy but high number of languages, concocts elaborate multilingual puns requiring lengthy explanations, sponsors festivals, and kicks metaphysical footballs around with Ayrs. Mrs. Dhondt is like Mrs. Crommelynck but ten times more so—in truth, a dreadful creation who heads the Belgian Equestrian Society drives the Dhondt Bugatti herself, and cossets a powder-puff Pekingese called Wei-wei. You'll meet her again in future letters, no doubt.

Relatives thin on the ground: Ayrs was an only child, and the once-influential Crommelynck family evinced a perverse genius for backing the wrong side at decisive moments throughout the war. Those who didn't die in action were mostly pauperized and diseased out of existence by the time Ayrs and his wife returned from Scandinavia. Others died after running away overseas. Mrs. Crommelynck's old governess and a couple of frail aunts sometimes pay a call, but they stay quietly in the corner like old hat stands.

Last week the conductor Tadeusz Augustowski, a great champion of Ayrs in his native Cracow, dropped by unannounced on a Second Day of Migraine. Mrs. Crommelynck was not at home, and Mrs. Willems came to me all of a lather, begging me to entertain the illustrious visitor. I could not disappoint. Augustowski's French is as good as my own, and we spent the afternoon fishing and arguing over the dodecaphonists. He thinks they are all charlatans, I do not. He told me orchestral war stories, and one indescribably smutty joke that involves hand gestures, so it must wait until we meet again. I caught an eleven-inch trout, and Augustowski bagged a monster dace. Ayrs was up when we got back at twilight, and the Pole told him he was lucky to have engaged me. Ayrs grunted something like "Quite." Enchanting flattery, Ayrs. Mrs. Willems was less than *enchantée* with our finny trophies, but she gutted 'em, cooked 'em in salt and butter, and they melted on the fish fork. Augustowski gave me his visiting card when he departed the next morning. He keeps a suite at the Langham Court for his London visits, and invited me to stay with him for next year's festival. Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Château Zedelghem isn't the labyrinthine House of Usher it seems at first. True, its west wing, shuttered and dust-sheeted to pay for modernization and upkeep of the east, is in a woebegone state, and will need the demolishers before v. long I fear. Explored its chambers one wet afternoon. Damp disastrous; fallen plaster hangs in nets of cobwebs; mouse, bat droppings crunch on the worn stones; plaster escutcheons above fireplaces sanded over by time. Same story outside—brick walls need new pointing, roof tiles missing, crenellations toppled to the

ground and lying in piles, rainwater runneling medieval sandstone. The Crommelyncks did well from Congo investments, but not one male sibling survived the war, and Zedelghem's Boche "lodgers" selectively gutted whatever was worth looting.

The east wing, however, is a comfortable little warren, though its roof timbers creak like a ship when the wind's up. There's a moody central-heating system and rudimentary electricity that gives one crackling electric shocks from the light switches. Mrs. Crommelynck's father had enough foresight to teach his daughter the estate business, and now she leases her land to neighboring farmers and just about makes the place pay, so I gather. Not an achievement to be sniffed at in this day and age.

Eva still a prissy missy, as hateful as my sisters, but with an intelligence to match her enmity Apart from her precious Nefertiti, her hobbies are pouting and looking martyred. She likes to reduce vulnerable domestics to tears, then flounces in, announcing, "She's having *another* weeping fit, Mama, can't you break her in properly?" She has established I am no soft target and embarked on a war of attrition: "Papa, how long is Mr. Frobisher to stay in our house?" "Papa, do you pay Mr. Frobisher as much as you pay Hendrick?" "Oh, I was only asking, Mama, I didn't know Mr. Frobisher's tenure was a delicate subject." She rattles me, hate to hand it to her, but there it is. Had another encounter—*confrontation* more the word— on Saturday just gone. I'd taken Ayrs's bible, *Also sprach Zarathustra,* to the stone slab bridge over the lake to the willow-tree island. A scorching hot afternoon; even in the shade I was sweating like a pig. After ten pages I felt Nietzsche was reading me, not I him, so I watched the water boatmen and newts while my mind-orchestra performed Fred Delius's *Air and Dance*. Syrupy florentine of a piece, but its drowsy flute is rather successful.

Next thing I knew, found myself in a trench so deep the sky was a strip high above, lit by flashes brighter than day. Savages patrolled the trench astraddle giant, evil-toothed, brown rats that sniffed out working-class people and dismembered 'em. Strolled, trying to look well-to-do and stop myself breaking into a panicky run, when I met Eva. I said, "What in hell are *you* doing down here?"

Eva replied with fury! "Ce lac appartient à ma famille depuis cinq siècles! Vous êtes ici depuis combien de temps exactement? Bien trois semaines! Alors vous voyez, je vais où bon me semble!" Her anger was almost physical, a kick in your humble correspondent's face. Fair enough, I had accused her of trespassing on her mother's estate. Wide awake, I stumbled to my feet, all apologies, explaining I had spoken whilst dreaming. Quite forgot about the lake. Plunged right in like a b fool! Soaked! Luckily the pond was only navel-high, and God had saved Ayrs's precious Nietzsche from joining me in the drink. When Eva eventually reined in her laughter, I said I was pleased to see her do something other than pout. I had duckweed in my hair, she answered, in English. Was reduced to patronizing her by praising her language skills. She batted back, "It does not take much to impress an Englishman." Walked off. Couldn't think of a snappy response until later, so the girl won the set.

Now, pay attention while I talk books and lucre. Poking through an alcove of books in my room, I came across a curious dismembered volume, and I want you to track down a complete copy for me. It begins on the ninety-ninth page, its covers are gone, its binding unstitched. From what little I can glean, it's the edited journal of a voyage from Sydney to California by a notary of San Francisco named Adam Ewing. Mention is made of the gold rush, so I suppose we are in 1849 or 1850. The journal seems to be published posthumously, by Ewing's son (?). Ewing puts me in mind of Melville's bumbler Cpt. Delano in "Benito Cereno," blind to all conspirators—he hasn't spotted his trusty Dr. Henry Goose *[sic]* is a vampire, fueling his hypochondria in order to poison him, slowly, for his money.

Something shifty about the journal's authenticity—seems too structured for a genuine diary, and its language doesn't ring quite true—but who would bother forging such a journal, and

why?
To my great annoyance, the pages cease, midsentence, some forty pages later, where the binding is worn through. Searched high and low in the library for the rest of the damn thing. No luck. Hardly in our interests to draw Ayrs's or Mrs. Crommelynck's attention to their unindexed bibliographic wealth, so I'm up a gum tree. Would you ask Otto Jansch on Caithness Street if he knows anything about this Adam Ewing? A half-read book is a half-finished love affair.
Find enclosed an inventory of the oldest editions in Zedel-ghem's library As you see, some items are *v*. early early seventeenth c, so send me Jansch's best prices as soon as ever, and keep the tightwad on his toes by letting it slip you've got the Parisian dealers interested.

Sincerely,

R.F.

* * *

CHATEAU ZEDELGHEM
28TH—VII—1931

Sixsmith,
Cause for minor celebration. Two days ago, Ayrs and I completed our first collaboration, a short tone poem, "Der Todtenvo-gel." When I unearthed the piece, it was a tame arrangement of an old Teutonic anthem, left high and very dry by Ayrs's retreating eyesight. Our new version is an intriguing animal. It borrows resonances from Wagner's *Ring,* then disintegrates the theme into a Stravinskyesque nightmare policed by Sibelian wraiths. Horrible, delectable, wish you could hear it. Ends in a flute solo, no flutter-bying flautism this, but the death-bird of the title, cursing the firstborn and last-born alike.
Augustowski visited again on his way back from Paris yesterday. He read the score and shoveled praise upon it like a boiler man shoveling coals. So he should! It's the most accomplished tone poem *I* know of written since the war; and I tell you, Sixsmith, that more than a few of its best ideas are mine. Suppose an amanuensis must reconcile himself to renouncing his share in authorship, but buttoning one's lip is never easy But best is yet to come — Augustowski wants to premiere the work under his own baton three weeks from now at the Cracow festival!
Got up at crack of dawn yesterday, spent all day transcribing a clean copy. Suddenly it didn't seem so short. My writing hand came unscrewed and staves imprinted themselves in my eyelids, but finished by supper. We drank five bottles of wine between the four of us to celebrate. Dessert was the best muscatel.
Am now Zedelghem's golden boy. Been a v. long time since I was anyone's golden boy and I rather like it. Jocasta suggested that I move out of my guest room into one of the larger unused

bedrooms on the second floor, furnished as I pleased with whatever catches my eye from elsewhere in Zedelghem. Ayrs seconded the motion, so I said I would. To my delight Prissy Missy lost her sangfroid and mewled, “Oh, why don’t you just write him into the will as well, Mama? Why not give him half the estate?” She got down from the table without being excused. Ayrs croaked, “First good idea the girl’s had in seventeen years!” loud enough for her to hear. “At least Frobisher earns his damn keep!”

My hosts wouldn’t hear my apologies, they said Eva should be apologizing to me, that she has to lose her pre-Copernican view of a universe revolving around herself. Music to my ears. Also re: Eva, she and twenty classmates are bound for Switzerland v. soon to study at a sister school for a couple of months. More music! It’ll be like having a rotten tooth fall out. My new room is big enough for badminton doubles; has a four-poster bed from whose curtains I had to shake last year’s moths; centuries-old Cordova peels off the walls like dragons’ scales, but it’s attractive in its way; indigo witch ball; armoire inlaid with burr walnut; six ministerial armchairs, and a sycamore escritoire at which I write this letter. Honeysuckle laces abundant light. To the south one looks over the grizzled topiary To the west, cows graze in the meadow, and the church tower rises above the wood beyond. Its bells are my own clock. (In truth, Zedelghem boasts a good many antique clocks, whose chimes go off some early, some late, like a Bruges in miniature.) All in all, a notch or two grander than our chambers in Whyman’s Lane, a notch or two less grand than the Savoy or the Imperial, but spacious and secure. Unless I do something clumsy or indiscreet.

Which brings me to Madame Jocasta Crommelynck Damn my eyes, Sixsmith, if the woman hasn’t begun, *subtly,* to flirt with me. The ambiguity of her words, eyes, and hand brushes is too consummate to be chance. See what you think. Yesterday afternoon, I was studying rare Balakirev juvenilia in my room when Mrs. Crom-melynck knocked. She wore her riding jacket and her hair pinned up to reveal a rather tempting neck. “My husband wants to give you a present,” she said, moving in as I gave way “Here. To mark the completion of ‘Todtenvogel.’ You know, Robert,”—her tongue lingers on the *t* of “Robert”—“Vyvyan’s so very happy to be working again. He hasn’t been this spry for years. This is just a token. Put it on.” She handed me an exquisite waistcoat, an Ottoman-style silken affair, too remarkable in pattern to be ever in fashion or out. “I bought it on our honeymoon in Cairo, when he was your age now. He won’t be wearing it again.”

Said I was flattered, but protested that I couldn’t possibly accept a garment of such sentimental value. “That’s precisely why we want you to wear it. Our memories are in its weave. Put it on.” Did as urged, and she stroked it, on the pretext (?) of removing fluff. “Come to the mirror!” Did so. The woman stood just inches behind me. “Too fine for moths’ eggs, don’t you agree?” Yes, I agreed. Her smile was double-bladed. If we were in one of Emily’s breathy novels, the seductress’s hands would have encircled the innocent’s torso, but Jocasta is a more canny operator. “You have *exactly* the same physique Vyvyan had at your age. Bizarre, isn’t it?” Yes, I agreed again. Her fingernails freed a strand of my hair that had got caught in the waistcoat. Neither rebuffed nor encouraged her. These things shouldn’t be rushed. Mrs. Crommelynck left without another word.

At luncheon, Hendrick reported that Dr. Egret’s house in Neer-beke had been burgled. Luckily no one was hurt, but the police have issued a warning to be on the lookout for gypsies and ruffians. Houses should be secured at night. Jocasta shuddered and said she was glad I was at Zedelghem to protect her. Admitted I’d held my own as a pugilist at Eton, but doubted whether I could see off a whole gang of ruffians. Perhaps I could hold Hendrick’s towel whilst *he* gave ’em all a sound drubbing? Ayrs didn’t comment, but that evening he unwrapped a Luger from his napkin. Jocasta chastised Ayrs for showing his pistol at the dinner table, but he ignored her. “On our return from Gothenburg, I found this beastie hidden under a loose floorboard in the

master bedroom, with its bullets," he explained. "The Prussian captain either left in a hurry or got himself killed. He stowed it there perhaps as an insurance policy against mutineers, or undesirables. I keep it beside my bed for the same reason."

Asked if I could hold it, as I'd only ever touched hunting rifles before. "By all means," replied Ayrs, handing it over. Every hair on my body rose. That snug iron fellow has killed at least once, Id wager my inheritance on it, if I still had any. "So you see"—Ayrs had a crooked laugh—"I may be an elderly, blind cripple, but I still have a tooth or two left to bite with. One blind man with a gun and *v*. little left to lose. Imagine the *mess* I could make!" Can't decide if I only imagined the menace in his voice.

Excellent news from Jansch, but don't tell him I said so. Will post the three referred volumes to you from Bruges next time I go—the postmaster here in Neerbeke has an inquisitive streak I don't trust. Take usual precautions. Remit my lucre to the First Bank of Belgium, Head Branch, Bruges—Dhondt snapped his fingers and had the manager open me an account. Only one Robert Frobisher on their lists, I'm quite sure.

Best news of all: started composing on my own account again.

Sincerely,

R.F

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ZEDELGHEM

16TH—viii—1931

Sixsmith,

Summer has taken a sensuous turn: Ayrs's wife and I are lovers. Don't alarm yourself! Only in the carnal sense. One night last week she came to my room, locked the door behind her, and without a word passing between us, disrobed. Don't wish to brag, but her visit didn't take me by surprise. In fact, I'd left the door ajar for her. Really, Sixsmith, you should try to enjoy lovemaking in total silence. All that ballyhooing transmutes into bliss if you'll only seal your lips.

When one unlocks a woman's body, her box of confidences also spills. (You should try 'em yourself one time, women I mean.) Might this be connected to their hopelessness at cards? After the Act, I am happier just lying still, but Jocasta talked, impulsively, as if to bury our big black secret under littler gray ones. Learnt Ayrs contracted his syphilis at a bordello in Copenhagen in 1915, during an extended separation, and has not pleasured his wife since that year; after Eva's birth, the doctor told Jocasta she could never conceive another child. She is v. selective about her occasional affairs but unapologetic about her right to conduct same. She insisted that she still loves Ayrs. I grunted, dubiously. That love loves fidelity she riposted, is a myth woven by men from their insecurities.

Talked about Eva too. She worries that she was so busy instilling a sense of propriety into her daughter, they never became friends, and now, it seems, that horse has bolted. Dozed through these trivial tragedies, but shall be more careful around Danes in future and Danish bordellos in particular.

J. wanted a second bout, as if to glue herself to me. Did not object. She has an equestrienne's body, more spring than you normally get in a mature woman, and more technique than many a ten-shilling mount I've ridden. One suspects there stretches back a long line of youthful stallions invited to forage in her manger. Indeed, just as I nodded off for the last time she said, "Debussy once spent a week at Zedelghem, before the war. He slept in this very bed, if I'm not mistaken." A minor chord in her tone suggested she was with him. Not impossible. Anything in a skirt, that's what I heard about Claude, and he *was* a Frenchman.

When Lucille knocked in the morning with my shaving water, I was quite alone. J.'s performance over breakfast was as nonchalant as my own, happy to note. Was even slightly caustic with me when I spilt a blob of jam on the place mat, prompting VA. to reprimand her, "Don't be such a stickleback, Jocasta! *Your* pretty hands won't have to scrub the stain out." Adultery is a tricky duet to pull off, Sixsmith—as in contract bridge, eschew partners clumsier than oneself or one winds up in a ghastly mess.

Guilt? None. A cuckolder's triumph? Not specially, no. Still rather miffed at Ayrs, if anything. The other evening, the Dhondts came to dinner and Mrs. D. asked for some piano music to help the food go down, so I played that "Angel of Mons" piece I wrote on holiday with you in the Scilly Isles two summers ago, though disclaimed its authorship by saying "a friend" had composed it. I've been rewriting it. It's better and more fluid and subtle than those sherbety Schubertian pastiches VA. spewed out in *his* twenties. J. and the Dhondts loved it so much they insisted on an encore. Was only six bars in when VA. exercised a hitherto unknown veto. "I'd advise your friend to master the Ancients before he frolics with the Moderns." Sounds like innocuous enough advice? However, he pronounced *friend* in a precise semitone that told me he was quite aware of my friend's true identity Perhaps he used the same ruse himself, at Grieg's in Oslo? "Without a thorough mastery of counterpoint and harmonics," VA. puffed, "this fellow'll never amount to anything but a hawker of fatuous gimmickry. Tell your *friend* that from me." I fumed in silence. VA. told J. to put on a gramophone recording of his own *Sirocco* Wind Quintet. She obeyed the truculent old bully. To console myself, I remembered how J.'s body is under her crepe de chine summer dress, and how hungrily she slips into my bed. V well, I shall gloat a little over my employer's cuckold's horns. Serves him right. An old sick prig is still a prig.

Augustowski sent this enigmatic telegram after the performance in Cracow. To translate from the French: FIRST TODTEN-VOGEL MYSTIFIED STOP SECOND PERFORMANCE FISTICUFFS STOP THIRD ADORED STOP FOURTH TALK OF TOWN STOP. We weren't sure what to think until newspaper clippings followed, hot on the telegram's heels, translated by Augustowski on the back of a concert program. Well, our "Todtenvogel" has become a cause célèbre! So far as we can see, the critics interpreted its disintegration of the Wagnerian themes as a frontal assault on the German Republic. A band of nationalist parliamentarians strong-armed the festival authorities into a fifth performance. The theater, eyeing receipts, complied with pleasure. The German ambassador made an official complaint, so a sixth was sold out within another twenty-four hours. The effect of all this is to raise the value of Ayrs's stock through the roof everywhere but Germany, where apparently, he is denounced as a Jewish devil. National newspapers across the Continent have written to request interviews. I have the pleasure of dispatching a polite but firm pro forma rejection to each. "I'm too busy composing," grumbles Ayrs. "If they want to know 'what I mean' they should listen to my bloody music." He's thriving on the attention, though. Even Mrs. Willems admits, since

my arrival the Master is invigorated.
Hostilities continue on the Eva front. Of concern is how she sniffs something rotten between my father and me. She wonders, publicly, why I never receive letters from my family, or why I don't have some clothes of my own sent over. She asked if one of my sisters would like to be her pen-friend. To win time I had to promise to put her proposal to 'em, and I might need you to do another forgery Make it very good. The devious vixen is almost a female Me.
August in Belgium is blistering this year. The meadow is turning yellow, the gardener is anxious about fires, farmers are worried about the harvest, but show me a placid farmer and I'll show you a sane conductor. Will seal this envelope now and walk to the village post office through the woods behind the lake. It wouldn't do to leave *these* pages lying around for a certain seventeen-year-old snoop to come across.
The important matter. Yes, I will meet Otto Jansch in Bruges to hand over the illuminated manuscripts in person, but you must broker all the arrangements. Don't want Jansch knowing whose hospitality I'm enjoying. Like all dealers, Jansch is a gluttonous, glabrous grasper, only more so. He wouldn't hesitate to try blackmail to lower our price—or even dispense with a price altogether. Tell him I'll expect payment on the nail in crisp banknotes, none of his funny credit arrangements with me. Then I'll forward a postal order to you, including the sum you loaned me. This way, you won't be incriminated if any monkey business takes place. I am already disgraced and thus have no reputation to lose by blowing the whistle on him. Tell Jansch that, too.

Sincerely,

R.F.

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ZEDELGHEM

EVENING, 16TH—VIII—1931

Sixsmith,
Your tedious letter from my father's "solicitor" was an Ace of Diamonds. Bravo. Read it aloud over breakfast—excited only passing interest. Saffron Walden postmark also a masterly touch. Did you actually drag yourself away from your lab into the sunny Essex afternoon to post it yourself? Ayrs invited our "Mr. Cummings" to see me at Zedelghem, but you'd written time was v. tight, so Mrs. Crommelynck said Hendrick'll drive me into town to sign the documents there. Ayrs grumbled about losing a day's work, but he's only happy when he's grumbling. Hendrick and I set off this dewy morning down the same roads I cycled from Bruges half a summertime ago. Wore a smart jacket of Ayrs's—much of his wardrobe is gravitating into mine, now my few items rescued from the Imperial's grasp are beginning to wear out. The Enfield was roped to the rear fender so I could honor my promise to return said bicycle to the

good constable. Our vellum-bound loot I had camouflaged in MS paper, which everyone at Zedelghem knows I am never without, and stowed out of casual sight in a mucky satchel I've appropriated. Hendrick had the Cow-ley's top down so there was too much wind for conversation. Taciturn chap, as is appropriate to his station. Peculiar to admit it, but since I've started servicing Mrs. Crommelynck I feel edgier with the husband's valet than I do with the husband. (Jocasta continues to bestow her favor on me, every third or fourth night, though never when Eva is at home, which is v. wise. Anyway, one mustn't gobble one's birthday chocolates all at once.) My unease stems from the probability that Hendrick knows. Oh, we above the stairs like to congratulate ourselves on our cleverness, but there are no secrets to those who strip the sheets. Not too worried. Don't place unreasonable demands on the servants, and Hendrick is canny enough to lay his bets on a strident mistress with many years ahead of her, not on an invalid master of Ayrs's prospects. Hendrick's an odd one, really. Hard to guess his tastes. Would make an excellent croupier.

He dropped me outside the Guildhall, untied the Enfield, and left me to run various errands and pay his respects, he said, to an ailing great-aunt. Rode my two wheels through crowds of sightseers, schoolchildren, and burghers and only got lost a few times. At the police station, the musical inspector made a great fuss of me and sent out for coffee and pastries. He was delighted my position with Ayrs has worked out so well. By the time I got away it was ten o'clock and time for my appointment. Didn't hurry. Good form to let tradesmen wait a little. Jansch was propping up the bar of Le Royal and greeted me with an "Aha, as I live and breathe, the Invisible Man, back by popular demand!" I swear, Sixsmith, that warty old Shylock looks more repulsive every time I clap eyes on him. Has he got a magical portrait of himself stashed in his attic, getting more beautiful by the year? Couldn't fathom why he seemed so pleased to see me. Looked around the lounge for tipped-off creditors—one beetly glare and I would have bolted. Jansch read my mind. "So suspicious, Roberto? *I*'m hardly going to make trouble for a naughty goose who lays such illuminated eggs, am I? Come now"—he indicated the bar—"what's your poison?"

Replied that sharing a building with Jansch, even such a large one, was poisonous enough, so I'd rather get down to business straightaway He chuckled, clapped me on the shoulder, and led me up to the room hed reserved for our transaction. Nobody followed us, but that didn't guarantee anything. Was now wishing I'd had you arrange a more public rendezvous, so Tam Brewer's thugs couldn't clap a sack over my head, throw me in a trunk, and haul me back to London. Got the books out of the satchel, and he got his pince-nez out of his jacket pocket. Jansch examined 'em at a desk by the window. He tried to knock the price down, claiming the condition of the volumes was more "fair" than "good." Calmly, I wrapped the books up, put 'em in my satchel, and made the stingy Jew chase me down the corridor until he admitted the volumes were indeed "good." Let him woo me back to the room, where we counted the banknotes, slowly, until the sum agreed was paid in full. Business over, he sighed, claimed I'd beggared him, smiled that smile, and put his hairy paw on my knee. Said it was books I'd come to sell. He asked why let business preclude pleasure? Surely a young buck abroad could find a use for a little pocket money? Left Jansch asleep an hour later and his wallet starved. Proceeded directly to the bank across the square and was seen to by the manager's own secretary. Sweet bird of solvency. As Pater is fond of saying, "One's own sweat is one's best reward!" (not that *he* ever sweated in his sinecured pulpit overly much). Next stop was the city's music shop, Flagstad's, where I bought a brick of MS paper to replace the missing bulk from my satchel for benefit of watchful eyes. Coming out, I saw a pair of drab spats in a shoemaker's window. Went in, bought 'em. Saw a shagreen cigarette box in a tobacconist's. Bought it.

Two hours remained to kill. Had a cold beer in a café, and another, and another, and smoked a whole packet of delicious French cigarettes. The Jansch money is no dragon's hoard, but God

knows it feels like one. Next I found a backstreet church (steered clear of the tourist places to avoid disgruntled book dealers) of candles, shadows, doleful martyrs, incense. Haven't been to church since the morning Pater cast me out. Street door kept banging shut. Wiry crones came, lit candles, went. Padlock on the votive box was of the best. People knelt in prayer, some moving their lips. Envy 'em, really I do. I envy God, too, privy to their secrets. Faith, the least exclusive club on Earth, has the craftiest doorman. Every time I've stepped through its wide-open doorway, I find myself stepping out on the street again. Did my best to think beatific thoughts, but my mind kept running its fingers over Jocasta. Even the stained-glass saints and martyrs were mildly arousing. Don't suppose such thoughts get me closer to Heaven. In the end, it was a Bach motet that shooed me away—choristers weren't damnably bad, but the organist's only hope for salvation was a bullet through the brain. Told him so, too—tact and restraint all well and good in small talk, but one mustn't beat around any bush where music is concerned.

At a prim and proper public garden named Minnewater Park, courting couples ambled arm in arm between willows, banksia roses, and chaperones. Blind, emaciated fiddler performed for coins. Now he *could* play. Requested "Bonsoir, Paris!" and he performed with such élan I pressed a crisp five-franc note into his hand. He removed his dark glasses, checked the watermark, invoked his pet saint's name, gathered his coppers, and scarpered through the flower beds, laughing like a madcap. Whoever opined "Money can't buy you happiness" obviously had far too much of the stuff.

Sat down on an iron bench. One o'clock bells chimed, nearby, far off, interspersed. Clerks crawled out from the law and merchants' offices to eat sandwiches in the park and feel the green breeze. Was wondering whether to be late for Hendrick when guess who waltzed into the park, unchaperoned, in the company of a dandified stick insect of a man twice her age, a vulgar gold wedding ring on his finger as bold as brass. Right first time. Eva. Hid behind a newspaper a clerk had left on the bench. Eva wasn't in physical contact with her companion, but they strolled right by me with an air of easy intimacy that she never, ever wears at Zedelghem. I jumped to the obvious conclusion.

Eva was stacking her chips on a doubtful card. He crowed, in order to be overheard by strangers and impress them. "A time is one's own, Eva, when oneself and one's peers take the same things for granted, without thinking about it. Likewise, a man is ruined when the times change but he does not. Permit me to add, empires fall for the same reason." This jackdaw philosophizer flummoxed me. A girl of E.'s looks could do better for herself, surely? E.'s behavior likewise flummoxed me. In broad daylight, in her own city! Does she *want* to ruin herself? Is she one of these libertarian suffragette Rossetti types? I followed the couple at a safe distance to a town house on a well-heeled road. The man gave the street a shifty once-over before putting his key in the latch. I ducked into a mews. Picture Frobisher rubbing his hands with glee!

Eva returned as usual late on Friday afternoon. In the vestibule between her room and the door to the stables is an oaken throne. In this I planted myself. Unfortunately I became lost in the chords in the chroma of old glass and didn't notice E., riding crop in her hand, not even aware she was being ambushed. "S'agit-il d'un guet-apens? Si vous voulez discuter avec moi d'un problème personnel, vous pourriez me prévenir?"

Being caught by surprise like that made me speak my thought aloud. Eva caught the word. *"Sneak,* you call me? 'Une moucharde'? Ce n'est pas un mot aimable, Mr. Frobisher. Si vous dites que je suis une moucharde, vous allez nuire à ma réputation. Et si vous nuisez à ma réputation, eh bien, il faudra que je ruine la vôtre!"

Belatedly, I opened fire. Yes, her reputation was precisely what I had to warn her about. If even a visiting foreigner to Bruges had seen her consorting in Minnewater Park during school

hours with a scrofulous toad, it was only a matter of time before all the ru-mormongers in the city had turned the name of Crommelynck-Ayrs to Mudd!

One moment I expected a slap, the next, she reddened and lowered her face. Meekly, she inquired, Avez-vous dit à ma mère ce que vous avez vu?" I replied that, no, I had not told anyone, yet. E. took careful aim: "Stupid of you, Monsieur Frobisher, because Mama could have told you that mysterious 'consort' was Monsieur van de Velde, the gentleman with whose family I lodge during my school week. His father owns the largest munitions factory in Belgium, and he is a respectable family man. Wednesday was a half holiday so Monsieur van de Velde was kind enough to accompany me from his office back to his house. His own daughters had a choir rehearsal to attend. The school does not like its girls to walk out alone, even during daylight. Sneaks live in parks, you see, dirty-minded sneaks, waiting to damage a girl's reputation, or perhaps prowling for opportunities to blackmail her."

Bluff or backfire? I hedged my bets. *"Blackmail?* I have three sisters of my own, and I was concerned for your reputation! That is all."

She relished her advantage. "Ah oui? Comme c'est délicat de votre part! Tell me, Mr. Frobisher, what exactly did you think Monsieur van de Velde was going to do to me? Were you *frightfully* jealous?"

Her awful directness—for a girl—quite knocked the bails off my wicket. "I am relieved that this simple misunderstanding has been cleared up"—I chose my most insincere smile—"and offer my sincerest apologies."

"I accept your sincerest apologies in the precise same spirit they are offered." E. walked off to the stables, her whip swishing the air like a lioness's tail. Went off to the music room to forget my dismal performance in some devilish Liszt. Can normally rattle off an excellent *La Prédication aux Oiseaux,* but not last Friday. Thank God E.'s leaving for Switzerland tomorrow. If she ever found out about her mother's nighttime visits—well, doesn't bear thinking about. Why is it I never met a boy I couldn't twist round my finger (not only my finger) but the women of Zedelghem seem to best me every time?

Sincerely,

R.F.

…

ZEDELGHEM
29TH—viii—1931

Sixsmith,

Sitting at my escritoire in my dressing gown. The church bell chimes five. Another thirsty dawn. My candle is burnt away A tiring night turned inside out. J. came to my bed at midnight, and during our athletics, my door was barged. Farcical horror! Thank God J. had locked it on her way in. The doorknob rattled, insistent knocking began. Fear can clear the mind as well as cloud it, and remembering my *Don Juan,* I hid J. in a nest of coverlets and sheets in my sagging bed and left the curtain half open to show I had nothing to hide. I fumbled across the room, not believing this was happening to me, deliberately knocking into things to buy time, and reaching the door, called out, "What in hell is the matter? Are we on fire?"

"Open up, Robert!" Ayrs! You can imagine, I was ready to duck bullets. Desperate, I asked what time it was, just to win another moment.
"Who cares? I don't know! I've got a melody, boy, for violin, it's a gift, and it won't let me sleep, so I need you to take it down, now!"
Could I trust him? "Can't it wait until the morning?"
"No, it bloody can't, Frobisher! I might lose it!"
Shouldn't we go to the music room?
"It'll wake up the house and, no, every note is in place, in my head!"
So I told him to wait while I lit a candle. Unlocked my door, and there stood Ayrs, a cane in each hand, mummified in his moonlit nightshirt. Hendrick stood behind him, silent and watchful as an Indian totem. "Make way, make way!" Ayrs pushed past me. "Find a pen, grab some blank score paper, turn on your lamp, quickly. Why the deuce do you lock your door if you sleep with the windows open? The Prussians are gone, the ghosts'll just drift through the door." Garbled some balderdash about not being able to fall asleep in an unlocked room, but he wasn't listening. "Have you got manuscript paper in here or should I have Hendrick go and get some?"
Relief that VA. hadn't come to catch me tupping his wife made his imposition seem less preposterous than it actually was, so fine, I said, yes, I have paper, I have pens, let's start. Ayrs's sight was too poor to see anything suspicious in the foothills of my bed, but Hendrick still posed a possible danger. One should avoid relying on servants' discretion. After Hendrick had helped his master to a chair and wrapped a rug round his shoulders, I told him I'd ring for him when we were done. Ayrs didn't contradict me—he was already humming. A conspiratorial flicker in H.'s eyes? Room too dim to be sure. The servant gave a near-imperceptible bow and glided away as if on well-oiled coasters, softly shutting the door behind him.
Splashed a little water on my face at the washbowl and sat opposite Ayrs, worrying J. might forget the creaking floorboards and try to tiptoe out.
"Ready"
Ayrs hummed his sonata, bar by bar, then named his notes. The oddity of the miniature soon absorbed me, despite the circumstances. It's a seesawing, cyclical, crystalline thing. He finished after the ninety-sixth bar and told me to mark the MS *triste*. Then he asked me, "So what d'you think?"
"Not sure," I told him. "It's not at all like you. Not much like anyone. But it hypnotizes."
Ayrs was now slumped, à la a Pre-Raphaelite oil painting entitled *Behold the Sated Muse Discards Her Puppet*. Birdsong foamed in the hour-before-dawn garden. Thought about J.'s curves in the bed, just a few yards away, even felt a dangerous throb of impatience for her. VA. was unsure of himself for once. "I dreamt of a … nightmarish café, brilliantly lit, but underground, with no way out. I'd been dead a long, long time. The waitresses all had the same face. The food was soap, the only drink was cups of lather. The music in the café was"—he wagged an exhausted finger at the MS—"this."
Rang for H. Wanted Ayrs out of my room before daylight found his wife in my bed. After a minute H. knocked. Ayrs got to his feet and limped over—he hates anyone seeing him assisted. "Good work, Frobisher." His voice found me from down the corridor. I shut the door and breathed that big sigh of relief. Climbed back to bed, where my swampy-sheeted alligator sank her little teeth into her young prey.
Wed begun a luxuriant farewell kiss when, damn me, the door creaked opened again. "Something else, Frobisher!" Mother of All Profanities, I hadn't locked the door! Ayrs drifted bedward like the wreck of the *Hesperus*. *J*. slid back under the sheets while I made disheveling, surprised noises. Thank God, Hendrick was waiting outside—accident or tact?

VA. found the end of my bed and sat there, just inches from the bump that was J. If J. sneezed or coughed now, even blind old Ayrs would catch on. "A tricky subject, so I'll just spit it out. Jocasta. She isn't a very faithful woman. Maritally, I mean. Friends hint at her indiscretions, enemies inform me of affairs. Has she ever … toward you … y know my meaning?"
Let my voice stiffen, masterfully "No, sir, I don't believe I do know your meaning."
"Spare me your bashfulness, boy!" Ayrs leant nearer. "Has my wife ever made advances? I have a right to know!"
Avoided a nervous giggle, by a whisker. "I find your question distasteful in the extreme." Jocasta's breath dampened my thigh. She must have been roasting alive under the covers. "*I* wouldn't call any 'friend' who spread such muck around by that name. In Mrs. Crommelynck's case, frankly, I find the notion as unthinkable as it is unpalatable. If, *if,* through some, I don't know, nervous collapse, she *were* to behave so inappropriately, well, to be honest, Ayrs, I'd probably ask for Dhondt's advice, or speak to Dr. Egret." Sophistry makes a fine smoke screen.
"So you're not going to give me a one-word answer?"
"You shall have a two-word answer. 'Emphatically no!' And I very much hope the subject is now closed."
Ayrs let long moments fall away "You're young, Frobisher, you're rich, you've got a brain, and by all accounts you're not wholly
repugnant. I'm not sure why you stay on here."
Good. He was getting mawkish. "You're my Verlaine." "Am I, young Rimbaud? Then where is your *Saison en Enfer?"* "In sketches, in my skull, in my gut, Ayrs. In my future." Couldn't say if Ayrs felt humor, pity nostalgia, or scorn. He left.
Locked the door and climbed into bed for the third time that night.
Bedroom farce, when it actually happens, is intensely sad. Jocasta

seemed angry with me. "What?" I hissed. "My husband loves you," said the wife, dressing.

Zedelghem's a-stirring. Plumbing makes noises like elderly aunts. Been thinking of my grandfather, whose wayward brilliance skipped my father's generation. Once, he showed me an aquatint of a certain Siamese temple. Don't recall its name, but ever since a disciple of the Buddha preached on the spot centuries ago, every bandit king, tyrant, and monarch of that kingdom has enhanced it with marble towers, scented arboretums, gold-leafed domes, lavished murals on its vaulted ceilings, set emeralds into the eyes of its statuettes. When the temple finally equals its counterpart in the Pure Land, so the story goes, that day humanity shall have fulfilled its purpose, and Time itself shall come to an end.
To men like Ayrs, it occurs to me, this temple is civilization. The masses, slaves, peasants, and foot soldiers exist in the cracks of its flagstones, ignorant even of their ignorance. Not so the great statesmen, scientists, artists, and most of all, the composers of the age, any age, who are civilization's architects, masons, and priests. Ayrs sees our role is to make civilization ever more resplendent. My employer's profoundest, or only, wish is to create a minaret that inheritors of Progress a thousand years from now will point to and say, "Look, there is Vyvyan Ayrs!"
How vulgar, this hankering after immortality how vain, how false. Composers are merely scribblers of cave paintings. One writes music because winter is eternal and because, if one didn't, the wolves and blizzards would be at one's throat all the sooner.

Sincerely,

R.F.

…

ZEDELGHEM

14.TH— **ix**—1931

Sixsmith,

Sir Edward Elgar came to tea this afternoon. Even you've heard *of him,* you ignoramus. Now, usually, if one asks Ayrs what he thinks of English music he'll say, "*What* English music? There is none! Not since Purcell!" and sulk all day, as if the Reformation were one's own doing. This hostility was forgotten in a trice when Sir Edward telephoned from his hotel in Bruges this morning, wondering if Ayrs might be able to spare him an hour or two. Ayrs made a show of curmudgeonliness, but I could tell by the way he badgered Mrs. Willems about the arrangements for tea, he was pleased as the cat who got the cream. Our celebrated guest arrived at half past two, dressed in a dark green Inverness cape despite the clement weather. The man's state of health isn't much better than VA.'s. J. & I welcomed him on the steps of Zedelghem. "So *you're* Vyv's new pair of eyes, are you?" he said to me, as we shook hands. Said I'd seen him conduct a dozen times at the festival, which pleased him. Guided the composer into the Scarlet Room, where Ayrs was waiting. They greeted each other warmly, but as if wary of bruises. Elgar's sciatic pain bothers him greatly, and even on good days, VA. looks pretty frightful at first sight, still worse at the second. Tea was served, and they talked shop, mostly ignoring J. & me, but it was fascinating to be a fly on the wall. Sir E. glanced at us now and then to make sure he was not wearing out his host. "Not at all." We smiled back. They fenced over such topics as saxophones in orchestras, whether Webern is Fraudster or Messiah, the patronage and politics of music. Sir E. announced he is at work on a Third Symphony after a long hibernation:—he even played us sketches of a *molto maestoso* and an *allegretto* on the upright. Ayrs most eager to prove that he isn't ready for his coffin either, and had me run through some recently completed piano sketches—rather lovely Several dead bottles of Trappist beer later, I asked Elgar about the *Pomp and Circumstance* marches. "Oh, I needed the money, dear boy But don't tell anyone. The King might want my baronetcy back." Ayrs went into laughter spasms at this! "I always say, Ted, to get the crowd to cry Hosanna, you must first ride into town on an ass. Backwards, ideally, whilst telling the masses the tall stories they want to hear."

Sir E. had heard about "Todtenvogel"'s reception in Cracow (all London has, it would seem), so VA. sent me off to fetch a score. Back in the Scarlet Room, our guest took our death-bird to the window seat and read it with the aid of a monocle while Ayrs and I pretended to busy ourselves. "A man at our time of life, Ayrs"— E. spoke at last—"has no right to such daring ideas. Where are you getting 'em from?"

VA. puffed up like a smug hornyback. "I suppose I've won a rearguard action or two in my war against decrepitude. My boy Robert here is proving a valuable aide-de-camp."

Aide-de-camp? I'm his bloody general and *he's* the fat old Turk reigning on the memory of faded glories! Smiled sweetly as I could (as if the roof over my head depended on it. Moreover, Sir E. might be useful one day so it won't do to create an obstreperous impression). During tea, Elgar contrasted my position at Zedelghem favorably with his first job as a musical director at a lunatic asylum in Worcestershire. "Excellent prep for conducting the London Philharmonic, what?" quipped VA. We laughed and I half-forgave the ratty old selfish crank for being himself. Put another log or two in the hearth. In the smoky firelight the two old men nodded off like a pair of ancient kings passing the aeons in their tumuli. Made a musical notation of their snores. Elgar is to be played by a bass tuba, Ayrs a bassoon. I'll do the same with Fred Delius and Trevor Mackerras and publish 'em all together in a work entitled *The Backstreet Museum of Stuffed Edwardians*.

Three days later

Just back from a *lento* walk with VA. down the Monk's Walk to the gatekeeper's lodge. I pushed his chair. Landscape v. atmospheric this evening; autumn leaves gusted around in urgent spirals, as if VA. was the sorcerer and I his apprentice. Poplars' long shadows barred the mown meadow. Ayrs wanted to unveil his concepts for a final, symphonic major work, to be named *Eternal Recurrence* in honor of his beloved Nietzsche. Some music will be drawn from an abortive opera based on *The Island of Doctor Moreau,* whose Viennese production was canceled by the war, some music VA. believes will "come" to him, and its backbone will be the "dream music" piece that he dictated in my room that hairy night last month, I wrote to you about that. VA. wants four movements, a female choir, and a large ensemble heavy in Ayrsesque woodwind. Truly, a behemoth of the deeps. Wants my services for another half year. Said I'd think about it. He said he'd up my salary, both vulgar and crafty of him. Repeated, I needed time. VA. most upset I didn't give him a breathy "Yes!" on the spot—but I want the old bugger to admit to himself that he needs me more than I him.

Sincerely,

R.F.

hellip;

ZEDELGHEM
28TH—**ix**—1931

Sixsmith,
J. growing v. tiresome. After our lovemaking, she spreads over my bed like a mooing moon-calf and demands to know about other women whose strings I've quivered. Now she's teased

names out of me, she says things like “Oh, I suppose Frederica taught you that?” (She plays with that birthmark in the hollow of my shoulder, the one you said resembles a comet—can’t *abide* the woman dabbling with my skin.) J. initiates petty rows in order to undergo tedious reconciliations and, worryingly has started to let our moonlight dramas slip into our daylight lives. Ayrs can’t see further than *Eternal Recurrence,* but Eva is due back in ten days, and that hawkeyed creature will sniff out a decomposing secret in a jiffy.

J. thinks our arrangement lets her fasten my future more tightly to Zedelghem—she says, half playful, half darkly, she’s not going to let me “abandon” either her or her husband, not in “their” hour of need. The devil, Sixsmith, is in the pronouns. Worst of all, she’s started to use the L-word on me, and wants to hear it back. What’s *wrong* with the woman? She’s nearly twice my age! What’s she after? Assured her I’ve never loved anyone except myself and have no intention of starting now, especially with another man’s wife, and especially when that man could poison my name in European musical society by writing half a dozen letters. So, of course, the female plies her customary ploys, sobs in my pillow, accuses me of “using” her. I agree, of course I’ve “used” her; just as she’s “used” me too. That’s the arrangement. If she’s no longer happy with it, she’s not my prisoner. So off she storms to pout for a couple of days and nights until the old ewe gets hungry for a young ram, then she’s back, calling me her darling boy, thanking me for “giving Vyvyan his music back,” and the stupid cycle begins all over again. I wonder if she’s resorted to Hendrick in the past. Wouldn’t put anything past the woman. If one of Renwick’s Austrian doctors opened up her head, a whole beehive of neuroses would swarm out. Had I known she was this unstable, I’d never have let her in my bed that first night. There’s a joylessness in her lovemaking. No, a savagery.

Have agreed to VA.’s proposal that I stay on here until next summer, at least. No cosmic resonance entered my decision—just artistic advantage, financial practicalities, and because J. might have some sort of collapse if I went. The consequences of *that* would not come out in the wash.

Later, same day

Gardener made a bonfire of fallen leaves—just came in from it. The heat on one’s face and hands, the sad smoke, the crackling and wheezing fire. Reminds me of the groundsman’s hut at Gresham. Anyway, got a gorgeous passage from the fire—percussion for crackling, alto bassoon for the wood, and a restless flute for the flames. Finished transcribing it this very minute. Air in the château clammy like laundry that won’t dry. Door-banging drafts down the passageways. Autumn is leaving its mellowness behind for its spiky, rotted stage. Don’t remember summer even saying good-bye.

Sincerely,

R.F.

HALF-LIVES

the first luisa rey
mystery

I

Rufus Sixsmith leans over the balcony and estimates his body's velocity when it hits the sidewalk and lays his dilemmas to rest. A telephone rings in the unlit room. Sixsmith dares not answer. Disco music booms from the next apartment, where a party is in full swing, and Sixsmith feels older than his sixty-six years. Smog obscures the stars, but north and south along the coastal strip, Buenas Yerbas's billion lights simmer. West, the Pacific eternity East, our denuded, heroic, pernicious, enshrined, thirsty berserk-ing American continent.
A young woman emerges from the next-door party and leans over the neighboring balcony. Her hair is shorn, her violet dress is elegant, but she looks incurably sad and alone. *Propose a suicide pact, why don't you?* Sixsmith isn't serious, and he isn't going to jump either, not if an ember of humor still glows. *Besides, a quiet accident is precisely what Grimaldi, Napier, and those sharp-suited hoodlums are praying for*. Sixsmith shuffles inside and pours himself another generous vermouth from his absent host's minibar, dips his hands in the icebox, then wipes his face. *Go out somewhere and phone Megan, she's your only friend left*. He knows he won't. *You can't drag her into this lethal mess*. The disco thump pulses in his temples, but it's a borrowed apartment and he judges it unwise to complain. *Buenas Yerbas isn't Cambridge. Anyway, you're in hiding*. The breeze slams the balcony door, and in fear Sixsmith spills half his vermouth. *No, you old fool, it wasn't a gunshot*.
He mops up the spillage with a kitchen towel, turns on the TV with the sound down low, and trawls the channels for *M*A*S*H*. *It's on somewhere. Just have to keep looking*.

2

Luisa Rey hears a clunk from the neighboring balcony "Hello?" *Nobody*. Her stomach warns her to set down her tonic water. *It was the bathroom you needed, not fresh air,* but she can't face weaving back through the party *and, anyway, there's no time*—down the side of the building she heaves: once, twice, a vision of greasy chicken, and a third time. *That,* she wipes her eyes, *is the third foulest thing you've ever done*. She slooshes her mouth out, spits residue into a flowerpot behind a screen. Luisa dabs her lips with a tissue and finds a mint in her handbag. *Go home and just dream up your crappy three hundred words for once. People only look at the pictures, anyhow*.

A man too old for his leather trousers, bare torso, and zebra waistcoat steps onto the balcony. *"Luisaaa!" A* crafted golden beard and a moonstone-and-jade ankh around his neck. "Hiya! Come out for a little stargazing, huh? Dig. Bix brought eight *ounces* of snow with him, man. One *wild cat*. Hey, did I say in the interview? I'm trying on the name Ganja at the moment. Maharaj Aja says Richard is outa sync with my Iovedic Self."

"Who?"

"My guru, *Luisaaa,* my guru! He's on his last reincarnation before—" Richard's fingers go *puff!* Nirvanawards. "Come to an audience. His waiting list normally takes, like, *forever,* but jade-ankh disciples get personal audiences on the same afternoon. Like, *why* go through college and shit when Maharaj Aja can, like, teach you everything about … *It."* He frames the moon in his fingers. *"Words* are so … *uptight*… Space … it's so … y know, like, *total*. Smoke some weed? Acapulco Gold. Got it off of Bix." He edges nearer. "Say, Lu, let's get high after the party Alone together, my place, dig? You could get a *very* exclusive interview. I may even write you a song and put it on my next LP."

"I'll pass."

The minor-league rock musician narrows his eyes. "Unlucky time of the month, huh? How's next week? I thought all you media chicks are on the Pill, like, forever."

"Does Bix sell you your pickup lines, too?"

He sniggers. "Hey, has that cat been telling you things?"

"Richard, just so there's no uncertainty I'd rather jump off this balcony than sleep with you, any time of any month. I really
would."

"Whoah!" His hand jerks back as if stung. "Pick-*ky*! Who d'you think you are, like, Joni fucking Mitchell? You're only a fucking *gossip columnist* in a magazine that like *no one ever reads!"*

3

The elevator doors close just as Luisa Rey reaches them, but the unseen occupant jams them with his cane. "Thank you," says Luisa to the old man. "Glad the age of chivalry isn't totally dead."

He gives a grave nod.

Luisa thinks, *He looks like he's been given a week to live*. She presses G. The ancient elevator begins its descent. A leisurely needle counts off the stories. Its motor whines, its cables grind, but between the tenth and ninth stories a *gatta-gatta-gatta* detonates then dies with a *phzzz-zzz-zz-z*. Luisa and Sixsmith thump to the floor. The light stutters on and off before settling on a buzzing sepia.

"You okay? Can you get up?"

The sprawled old man recovers himself a little. "No bones broken, I think, but I'll stay seated, thank you." His old-school English accent reminds Luisa of the tiger in *The Jungle Book*. "The power might restart suddenly."

"Christ," mutters Luisa. "A power outage. Perfect end to a perfect day." She presses the emergency button. Nothing. She presses the intercom button and hollers: "Hey! Anyone there?" Static hiss. "We have a situation here! Can anyone hear us?"

Luisa and the old man regard each other, sideways, listening.

No reply. Just vague submarine noises.

Luisa inspects the ceiling. "Got to be an access hatch …" There isn't. She peels up the carpet—a steel floor. "Only in movies, I guess."

"Are you still glad," asks the old man, "the age of chivalry isn't dead?"

Luisa manages a smile, just. "We might be here some time. Last month's brownout lasted seven hours." *Well, at least I'm not confined with a psychopath, a claustrophobe, or Richard Ganga.*

4

Rufus Sixsmith sits propped in a corner sixty minutes later, dabbing his forehead with his handkerchief. "I subscribed to *Illustrated Planet* in 1967 to read your father's dispatches from Vietnam. Lester Rey was one of only four or five journalists who grasped the war from the Asian perspective. I'm fascinated to hear how a policeman became one of the best correspondents of his generation."

"You asked for it." The story is polished with each retelling. "Dad joined the BYPD just weeks before Pearl Harbor, which is why he spent the war here and not in the Pacific like his brother Howie, who got blown to pieces by a Japanese land mine playing beach volleyball in the Solomons. Pretty soon, it became apparent Dad was a Tenth Precinct case, and that's where he wound up. There's such a precinct in every city in the country—a sort of pen where they transfer all the straight cops who won't go on the take and who won't turn a blind eye. So anyway, on V-J night, Buenas Yerbas was one citywide party and you can imagine, the police were stretched thin. Dad got a call reporting looting down on Sil-vaplana Wharf, a sort of no-man's-land between Tenth Precinct, the BY Port Authority and Spinoza Precinct. Dad and his partner, a man named Nat Wakefield, drove down to take a look. They park between a pair of cargo containers, kill the engine, proceed on foot, and see maybe two dozen men loading crates from a warehouse into an armored truck. The light was dim, but the men sure weren't dockworkers and they weren't in military uniform. Wake-field tells Dad to go and radio for backup. Just as Dad gets to the radio, a call comes through saying the original order to investigate looting has been countermanded. Dad reports what he'd seen, but the order is repeated, so Dad runs back to the warehouse just in time to see his partner accept a light from one of the men and get shot six times in the back. Dad somehow keeps his nerve, sprints back to his squad car, and manages to radio out a Code 8 — a Mayday—before his car shivers with bullets. He's surrounded on all sides except the dockside, so over the edge he dives, into a cocktail of diesel, trash, sewage, and sea. He swims underneath the quay—in those days Silvaplana Wharf was a steel structure like a giant boardwalk, not the concrete peninsula it is today—and hauls himself up a service ladder, soaked, one shoe missing, with his non-functioning revolver. All he can do is observe the men, who are just finishing up when a couple of Spinoza Precinct squad cars arrive on the scene. Before Dad can circle around the yard to warn the officers, a hopelessly uneven gunfight breaks out—the gunmen pepper the two squad cars with *submachine guns*. The truck starts up, the gunmen jump aboard, they pull out of the yard and lob a couple of hand grenades from the back. Whether they were intended to maim or just to discourage heroics, who knows? but one caught Dad and made a human pincushion of him. He woke up two days later in the hospital minus his left eye. The papers described the incident as an opportunistic raid by a gang of thieves who got lucky. The Tenth Precinct men reckoned a syndicate who'd been siphoning off arms throughout the war decided to shift their stock, now that the war was over and accounting would get tightened up. There

was pressure for a wider investigation into the Silvaplana Shootings—three dead cops meant something in 1945—but the mayor's office blocked it. Draw your own conclusions. Dad did, and they jaded his faith in law enforcement. By the time he was out of the hospital eight months later, he'd completed a correspondence course in journalism." "Good grief," says Sixsmith.
"The rest you may know. Covered Korea for *Illustrated Planet,* then became *West Coast Herald's* Latin America man. He was in Vietnam for the battle of Ap Bac and stayed based in Saigon until his first collapse back in March. It's a miracle my parents' marriage lasted the years it did—y know, the longest I spent with him was April to July this year, in the hospice." Luisa is quiet. "I miss him, Rufus, chronically I keep forgetting he's dead. I keep thinking he's away on assignment, somewhere, and he'll be flying in any day soon."
"He must have been proud of you, following in his footsteps."
"Oh, Luisa Rey is no Lester Rey I wasted years being rebellious and liberated, posing as a poet and working in a bookstore on En-gels Street. My posturing convinced no one, my poetry was 'so vacuous it isn't even bad'—so said Lawrence Ferlinghetti—and the bookstore went bust. So I'm still only a columnist." Luisa rubs her tired eyes, thinking of Rchard Ganga's parting shot. "No award-winning copy from war zones. I had high hopes when I moved to *Spyglass,* but simpering gossip on celebrity parties is the closest I've gotten so far to Dad's vocation."
"Ah, but is it well-written simpering gossip?"
"Oh, it's *excellently* written simpering gossip."
"Then don't bemoan your misspent life quite yet. Forgive me for flaunting my experience, but you have no *conception* of what a misspent life constitutes."

5

"Hitchcock loves the limelight," says Luisa, her bladder now growing uncomfortable, "but hates interviews. He didn't answer my questions because he didn't really hear them. His best works, he said, are roller coasters that scare the riders out of their wits but let them off at the end giggling and eager for another ride. I put it to the great man, the key to fictitious terror is partition or containment: so long as the Bates Motel is sealed off from our world, we want to peer in, like at a scorpion enclosure. But a film that shows the world *is* a Bates Motel, well, that's … the stuff of Buchenwald, dystopia, depression. We'll dip our toes in a predatory, amoral, godless universe—but only our toes. Hitchcock's response was"—Luisa does an above-average impersonation—" 'I'm a director in Hollywood, young lady, not an Oracle at Delphi.' I asked why Buenas Yerbas had never featured in his films. Hitchcock answered, 'This town marries the worst of San Francisco with the worst of Los Angeles. Buenas Yerbas is a city of nowhere.' He spoke in bons mots like that, not to you, but into the ear of posterity for dinner-party guests of the future to say, 'That's one of Hitchcock's, you know.' "
Sixsmith wrings sweat from his handkerchief. "I saw *Charade* with my niece at an art-house cinema last year. Was that Hitchcock? She strong-arms me into seeing these things, to prevent me from growing 'square.' I rather enjoyed it, but my niece said Audrey Hepburn was a 'bubblehead.' Delicious word."
"Charade's the one where the plot swings on the stamps?"
"A contrived puzzle, yes, but all thrillers would wither without contrivance. Hitchcock's Buenas Yerbas remark puts me in mind of John F. Kennedy's observation about New York. Do you know it? 'Most cities are nouns, but New York is a verb' What might Buenas Yerbas be, I wonder?"

"A string of adjectives and conjunctions?"
"Or an expletive?"

6

"Megan, my treasured niece." Rufus Sixsmith shows Luisa a photograph of a bronzed young woman and a fitter, healthier self taken at a sunny marina. The photographer said something funny just before the shutter clicked. Their legs dangle over the stern of a small yacht named *Starfish*. "That's my old tub, a relic from more dynamic days."
Luisa makes polite noises about not being old.
"Truly. If I went on a serious voyage now I'd need to hire a small crew. I still spend a lot of weekends on her, pottering about the marina and doing a little thinking, a little work. Megan likes the sea, too. She's a born physicist with a better head for mathematics than I ever had, rather to her mother's chagrin. My brother didn't marry Megan's mother for her brain, I'm sorry to say She buys into *feng shui* or *I Ching* or whatever instant-enlightenment mumbo jumbo is top of the charts. But Megan possesses a superb mind. She spent a year of her Ph.D. at my old college at Cambridge. A woman, at Caius! Now she's finishing her radioastronomy research at the big dishes on Hawaii. While her mother and her stepfather crisp themselves to toast on the beach in the name of Leisure, Megan and I knock around equations in the bar."
"Any children of your own, Rufus?"
"I've been married to science all my life." Sixsmith changes the subject. "A hypothetical question, Miss Rey What price would you pay, as a journalist I mean, to protect a source?"
Luisa doesn't consider the question. "If I believed in the issue? Any."
"Prison, for example, for contempt of court?"
"If it came to it, yes."
"Would you be prepared to … compromise your own safety?"
"Well …" Luisa does consider this. "I … guess I'd have to."
"Have to? How so?"
"My father braved booby-trapped marshes and the wrath of generals for the sake of *his* journalistic integrity What kind of a mockery of his life would it be if his daughter bailed when things got a little tough?"
Tell her. Sixsmith opens his mouth to tell her everything—the whitewashing at Seaboard, the blackmailing, the corruption—but without warning the elevator lurches, rumbles, and resumes its descent. Its occupants squint in the restored light, and Sixsmith finds his resolve has crumbled away. The needle swings round to G.
The air in the lobby feels as fresh as mountain water.
"I'll telephone you, Miss Rey," says Sixsmith, as Luisa hands him his stick, "soon." *Will I break this promise or keep it?* "Do you know?" he says. "I feel I've known you for *years,* not ninety minutes."

7

The flat world is curved in the boy's eye. Javier Gomez leafs through a stamp album under an

Anglepoise lamp. A team of huskies barks on an Alaskan stamp, a Hawaiian *nene* honks and waddles on a fifty-cents special edition, a paddle steamer churns up an inky Congo. A key turns in the lock, and Luisa Rey stumbles in, kicking off her shoes in the kitchenette. She is exasperated to find him here. “Javier!”

“Oh, hi.”

“Don’t ‘Oh, hi’ me. You promised not to jump across the balconies *ever* again! Suppose someone reports a burglar to the cops? Suppose you slipped and fell?”

“Then just give me a key.”

Luisa strangles an invisible neck. “I can’t rest easy knowing an eleven-year-old can waltz into my living space whenever …” *your mom’s out all night,* Luisa replaces with “… there’s a slow night on TV.”

“So why leave the bathroom window open?”

“Because if there’s one thing worse than you jumping the gap once, it’d be you jumping the gap again when you couldn’t get in.”

“I’ll be eleven in January.”

“No key”

“Friends give each other keys.”

“Not when one is twenty-six and the other is still in the fifth grade.”

“So why are you back so late? Meet anyone *interesting?”*

Luisa glares. “Trapped by the brownout in an elevator. None of your business, anyhow, mister.” She switches on the main light and flinches when she sees the mean red welt on Javier’s face. “What the—what happened?”

The boy glances at the apartment wall, then returns to his stamps.

“Wolfman?”

Javier shakes his head, folds a tiny paper strip, and licks both sides. “That Clark guy came back. Mom’s working the graveyard shift at the hotel all this week, and he’s waiting for her. He asked me stuff about Wolfman, and I told him it wasn’t any of his business.” Javier attaches the hinge to the stamp. “It doesn’t hurt. I already dabbed stuff on it.” Luisa’s hand is already on the telephone. “Don’t phone Mom! She’ll rush back, there’ll be a massive fight, and the hotel’ll fire her like last time and the time before.” Luisa considers this, replaces the receiver, and starts for the door. “Don’t go around there! He’s sick in the head! He’ll get angry and wreck our stuff, then we’ll probably get evicted or something! *Please.”* Luisa looks away. She takes a deep breath. “Cocoa?” “Yes, please.” The boy is determined not to cry, but his jaw aches with the effort. He wipes his eyes on his wrists. “Luisa?” “Yes, Javi, you’re sleeping on my sofa tonight, it’s okay”

8

Dom Grelsch’s office is a study in ordered chaos. The view across Third Avenue shows a wall of offices much like his own. An Incredible Hulk punching bag hangs from a metal gallows in the corner. The editor-in-chief of *Spyglass* magazine declares the Monday A.M. features meeting open by stabbing a stubby digit at Roland Jakes, a grizzled, prunelike man in an aloha shirt, flared Wranglers, and dying sandals. “Jakes.”

“I, uh, wanna follow up my *Terror in Sewerland* series, to tie in with *Jaws* fever. Dirk Melon, he can be a freelance hack, is found under 50th East Street on a routine maintenance inspection. Or rather his, uh, remains are. Dental records and tattered press pass ID him. Flesh torn from

corpse in manner consistent with *Ser-rasalmus scapularis*—I thank you—queen bitch of all piranhas, imported by fish freaks, then flushed down toilets when the meat bill gets too big. I'll phone Captain Vermin at City Hall and have him deny a spate of attacks on sewage workers. Taking notes, Luisa? Believe nothing till it's officially denied. So c'mon, Grelsch. Time you gave me that raise?"

"Just be grateful your last paycheck didn't *boing*. On my desk by eleven tomorrow, with a pic of one of those snappers. A question, Luisa?"

"Yes. Is there a new editorial policy no one's told me about that excludes articles containing truth?"

"Hey, metaphysics seminar is on the roof. Just take the elevator up and keep walking until you hit the sidewalk. Anything is true if enough people believe it is. Nancy, what've you got for me?"

Nancy O'Hagan has conservative clothes, a pickled complexion, and giraffe-size eyelashes that often come unstuck. "My trusty mole got a picture of the bar on the president's airplane. 'Wing-dings and gin slings on *Air Force One*.' The dumb money says the last drop's been squeezed out of the old soak, but Auntie Nance thinks not."

Grelsch considers. Telephones ring and typewriters clack in the background. "Okay, if nothing fresher comes up. Oh, and interview that ventriloquist puppet guy who lost his arms for *It Never Rains* … Nussbaum. You're up."

Jerry Nussbaum wipes dewdrops of choco-Popsicle from his beard, leans back, and triggers a landslide of papers. "The cops are chasing their own asses on the St. Christopher case, so how about a Are *You* St. Christopher's Next Slaying?' piece? Profiles of all the snuffs to date and reconstructions of the victims' last minutes. Where they were going, who they were meeting, what thoughts were going through their heads …"

"When St. Chris's bullet went through their heads." Roland Jakes laughs.

"Yeah, Jakes, let's hope he's attracted to flashy Hawaiian colors. Then later I'm seeing the colored streetcar driver the cops had on the rack last week. He's suing the police department for wrongful arrest under the Civil Rights Act."

"Could be a cover story. Luisa?"

"I met an atomic engineer." Luisa ignores the indifference chilling the room. "An inspector at Seaboard Incorporated." Nancy O'Hagan is doing her fingernails, driving Luisa to present her suspicions as facts. "He believes the new HYDRA nuclear reactor at Swannekke Island isn't as safe as the official line. Isn't safe at all, in fact. Its launch ceremony is this afternoon, so I want to drive out and see if I can turn anything up."

"Hot shit, a technical launch ceremony," exclaims Nussbaum. "What's that rumbling sound, everyone? A Pulitzer Prize, rolling this way?"

"Oh, kiss my ass, Nussbaum."

Jerry Nussbaum sighs. "In my wettest dreams …"

Luisa is torn between retaliation—*Yeah, and letting the worm know how much he riles you*—and ignoring him—*Yeah, and letting the worm get away with saying what the heck he wants.* Dom Grelsch breaks her impasse. "Marketeers prove"—he twirls a pencil—"every scientific term you use represents two thousand readers putting down the magazine and turning on a rerun of *I Love Lucy*."

"Okay," says Luisa. "How about 'Seaboard Atom Bomb to Blow Buenas Yerbas to Kingdom Come!'?"

"Terrific, but you'll need to prove it."

"Like Jakes can prove his story?"

"Hey" Grelsch's pencil stops twirling. "Fictitious people eaten by fictitious fish can't flay every last dollar off you in the courts or lean on your bank to pull the plug. A coast-to-coast operation

like Seaboard Power Inc. has lawyers who can and, sweet Mother of God, you put a foot wrong, they *will.”*

9

Luisa’s rust-orange VW Beetle travels a flat road toward a mile-long bridge connecting Yerbas Cape to Swannekke Island, whose power station dominates the lonely estuary. The bridge checkpoint is not quiet today A hundred-strong demonstration lines the last stretch, chanting, “Swannekke C over our dead bodies!” A wall of police keeps them back from the line of nine or ten vehicles. Luisa reads the placards while she waits. YOU ARE NOW ENTERING CANCER ISLAND, warns one, another, HELL, NO! WE WON’T GO! and, enigmatically, WHERE OH WHERE IS MARGO ROKER?

A guard taps on the window; Luisa winds it down and sees her face in the guard’s sunglasses.

“Luisa Rey, *Spyglass* magazine.”

“Press pass, ma’am.”

Luisa gets it from her purse. “Expecting trouble today?”

“Nah.” He consults a clipboard and hands back her pass. “Only our regular nature freaks from the trailer park. The college boys are vacationing where the surf’s better.”

As she crosses the bridge, the Swannekke B plant emerges from behind the older, grayer cooling towers of Swannekke A. Once again, Luisa wonders about Rufus Sixsmith. *Why wouldn’t he give me a contact number? Scientists can’t be telephobic. Why did no one in the super’s office in his apartment building even know his name? Scientists can’t have aliases.*

Twenty minutes later Luisa arrives at a colony of some two hundred luxury homes overlooking a sheltered bay. A hotel and golf course share the semiwooded slope below the power station. She leaves her Beetle in the R & D parking lot and looks at the power station’s abstract buildings half-hidden by the brow of the hill. An orderly row of palm trees rustles in the Pacific wind.

“Hi!” A Chinese-American woman strides up. “You look lost. Here for the launch?” Her stylish oxblood suit, flawless makeup, and sheer poise make Luisa feel shabby in her blueberry suede jacket. “Fay Li”—the woman offers her hand—“Seaboard PR.”

“Luisa Rey, *Spyglass* magazine.”

Fay Li’s handshake is powerful. *“Spyglass?* I didn’t *realize—*”

“—our editorial scope includes energy policy?”

Fay Li smiles. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s a feisty magazine.”

Luisa invokes Dom Grelsch’s reliable deity “Market research identifies a growing public who demand more substance. I was hired as *Spyglass’s* highbrow face.”

“Very glad you’ve come, Luisa, whatever your brow. Let me sign you in at Reception. Security insists on bag searches and the rest, but it’s no good having our guests treated like saboteurs. That’s why *I* was hired.”

10

Joe Napier watches a bank of CCTV screens covering a lecture theater, its adjacent corridors,

and the Public Center grounds. He stands, fluffs up his special cushion, and sits on it. *Is it my imagination, or are my old wounds aching more of late?* His gaze flits from screen to screen to screen. One shows a technician doing a sound check; another, a TV crew discussing angles and light; Fay Li crossing the parking lot with a visitor; waitresses pouring wine into hundreds of glasses; a row of chairs beneath a banner reading SWANNEKKE B— AN AMERICAN MIRACLE.

The real miracle, Joseph Napier ruminates, *was getting eleven out of twelve scientists to forget the existence of a nine-month inquiry.* A screen shows these very scientists drifting onstage, chatting amicably *Like Grimaldi says, every conscience has an off switch somewhere.* Napier's thoughts segue through memorable lines from the interviews that achieved the collective amnesia. *"Between us, Dr. Franklin, the Pentagon's lawyers are itching to try out their shiny new Security Act. The whistle-blower is to be blacklisted in every salaried position in the land."*

A janitor adds another chair to the row onstage.

"The choice is simple, Dr. Moses. If you want Soviet technology to burn ahead of ours, leak this report to your Union of Concerned Scientists, fly to Moscow to collect your medal, but the CIA has told me to tell you, you won't be needing a round-trip ticket."

The audience of dignitaries, scientists, think-tank members, and opinion formers take their seats. A screen shows William Wiley, vice CEO of Seaboard Inc., joking with those VIPs to be honored with a seat onstage.

"Professor Keene, the Defense Department brass are a little curious. Why voice your doubts now? Are you saying your work on the prototype was slipshod?"

A slide projector beams a fish-eye aerial shot of Swannekke B.

Eleven out of twelve. Only Rufus Sixsmith gets away.

Napier speaks into his walkie-talkie. "Fay? Show starts in ten minutes."

Static. "Copy that, Joe. I'm escorting a visitor to the lecture theater."

"Report to Security when you're through, please."

Static. "Copy. Over and out."

Napier weighs the set in his hand. *And Joe Napier? Has his conscience got an off switch?* He sips his bitter black coffee. *Hey, buddy, get off my case. I'm only following orders. Eighteen months till I retire, then it's off to fish in sweet rushing rivers until I turn into a goddamn heron.*

Milly his deceased wife, watches her husband from the photograph on his console desk.

11

"Our great nation suffers from a debilitating addiction." Alberto Grimaldi, Seaboard CEO and *Newsweek* Man of the Year, is king of the dramatic pause. "Its name is Oil." He is gilded by the podium lights. "Geologists tell us, just seventy-four billion gallons of this Jurassic ocean scum remain in the Persian Gulf. Enough, maybe, to see out our century? Probably not. The most imperative question facing the USA, ladies and gentlemen, is 'Then what?' "

Alberto Grimaldi scans his audience. *In the palm of my hand.* "Some bury their heads in the sand. Some fantasize about wind turbines, reservoirs, and"—wry half smile—"pig gas." Appreciative chuckle. "At Seaboard we deal in realities." Voice up. "I am here today to tell you that the cure for oil is *right* here, *right* now, on Swannekke Island!"

He smiles as the cheers subside. "As of today, domestic, abundant, and *safe* atomic energy has

come of age! Friends, I am *so* very, *very* proud to present one of the major engineering innovations *in history* … the HYDRA-Zero reactor!” The slide screen changes to show a cross-section diagram, and a primed section of the audience applauds wildly, prompting most of the theater to follow suit.

“But hey, now, enough of me, I’m only the CEO.” Affectionate laughter. “Here to unveil our viewing gallery and flick that switch to connect Swannekke B to the national grid, the Seaboard family is *deeply* honored to welcome a very special visitor. Known on Capitol Hill as the president’s ‘Energy Guru’ ”—full smile—“it gives me profound pleasure to welcome a man who needs no introduction. Federal Power Commissioner Lloyd Hooks!”

An immaculately groomed man strides onstage to great applause. Lloyd Hooks and Alberto Grimaldi grasp each other’s forearms in a gesture of fraternal love and trust. “Your scriptwriters are getting better,” Lloyd Hooks murmurs, as both men grin broadly for the audience, “but you’re still Greed on Two Legs.”

Alberto Grimaldi backslaps Lloyd Hooks and replies in kind, “You’ll only wrangle your way onto this company’s board over my dead body, you venal sonofabitch!”

Lloyd Hooks beams out at the audience. “So you *can* still come up with creative solutions, Alberto.”

A cannonade of flashes opens fire.

A young woman in a blueberry jacket slips out of a rear exit.

12

“The ladies’ restroom, please?”

A guard speaking on his walkie-talkie waves her down a corridor.

Luisa Rey glances back. The guard’s back is turned, so she continues on around a corner and into a grid of repeated corridors, chilled and muffled by humming air coolers. She passes a pair of hurrying technicians in overalls who eye her breasts from under their caps but who do not challenge her. Doors bear cryptic signs. W212 DEMI-OUTLETS, YOO9 SUBPASSES [AC], V77O HAZ-ARDLESS [EXEMPTED]. Periodic higher-security doors have keypad entry systems. At a stairwell she examines a floor plan but finds no trace of any Sixsmith.

“You lost, lady?”

Luisa does her best to recover her poise. A silver-haired black janitor stares at her.

“Yes, I’m looking for Dr. Sixsmith’s room.” “Uh-huh. English guy. Third floor, C105.”

“Thank you.”

“He ain’t been around a week or two.” “Is that a fact? Can you tell me why?” “Uh-huh. Went to Vegas on vacation.” “Dr. Sixsmith? Vegas?” “Uh-huh. So I was told.”

Room C105’s door is ajar. A recent attempt to erase “Dr. Sixsmith” from the nameplate ended in messy failure. Through the crack Luisa Rey watches a young man sitting on the table, sifting through a pile of a notebooks. The contents of the room are in several shipping crates. Luisa remembers her father saying, *Acting like an insider can be enough to be one*.

“Well,” says Luisa, strolling in. “*You’re* not Dr. Sixsmith, are you?”

The man drops the notebook guiltily, and Luisa knows she’s bought a few moments. “Oh, my God”—he stares back—“you must be Megan.”

Why be contradictory? “And you are?”

"Isaac Sachs. Engineer." He gets to his feet and aborts a premature handshake. "I worked with your uncle on his report." Brisk footsteps echo up the stairwell. Isaac Sachs closes the door. His voice is low and nervy: "Where's Rufus hiding, Megan? I've been worried sick. Have *you* heard from him?"

"I was hoping you could tell me what's happened."

Fay Li strides in with the unimpressed security man. "Luisa. Still looking for the ladies' room?"

Act stupid. "No. I'm all finished with the ladies' room—it was spotlessly clean—but I'm late for my appointment with Dr. Six-smith. Only … well, it seems he's moved out."

Isaac Sachs makes a "hah?" noise. "You're not Sixsmith's niece?"

"Excuse me, but *I* never said I was." Luisa produces a pre-prepared gray lie for Fay Li. "I met Dr. Sixsmith on Nantucket last spring. We found we were both based in Buenas Yerbas, so he gave me his card. I dug it out three weeks ago, called him up, and we arranged to meet today to discuss a science feature for *Spyglass*." She consults her watch. "Ten minutes ago. The launch speeches went on longer than I'd expected, so I slipped quietly away. I hope I haven't caused any trouble?"

Fay Li acts convinced. "We can't have unauthorized people wandering around a sensitive research institute like ours."

Luisa acts contrite. "I thought signing in and having my bag checked *was* the security procedure, but I guess that was naïve. Dr. Sixsmith will vouch for me, though. Just ask him."

Sachs and the guard both glance at Fay Li, who does not miss a beat. "That isn't going to be possible. One of our Canadian projects needed Dr. Sixsmith's attention. I can only imagine his secretary didn't have your contact details when she cleared his appointments diary"

Luisa looks at the boxes. "Looks like he's going to be away for a while."

"Yes, so we're shipping him his resources. His consultancy here at Swannekke was winding up. Dr. Sachs here has done a gallant job of tying up the loose ends."

"So much for my first interview with a great scientist."

Fay Li holds the door open. "Maybe we can find you another."

13

"Operator?" Rufus Sixsmith cradles the receiver in an anonymous suburban motel outside Buenas Yerbas. "I'm having trouble placing a call to Hawaii … yes. I'm trying to call …" He reads out Megan's telephone number. "Yes, I'll stay by the phone."

On a TV with no yellow or green, Lloyd Hooks backslaps Alberto Grimaldi at the inauguration of the new HYDRA reactor at Swannekke Island. They salute the lecture theater like conquering sportsmen, and silver confetti falls from the roof. "No stranger to controversy," says a reporter, "Seaboard CEO Alberto Grimaldi today announced the go-ahead of Swannekke C. Fifty million federal dollars will be poured into the second HYDRA-Zero reactor, and thousands of new jobs will be created. Fears that the mass arrests seen earlier this summer at Three Mile Island would be repeated in the Golden State did not materialize."

Frustrated and weary, Rufus Sixsmith addresses the TV "And when the hydrogen buildup blows the roof off the containment chamber? When prevailing winds shower radiation over California?" He turns the set off and squeezes the bridge of his nose. *I proved it. I proved it. You couldn't buy me, so you tried intimidation. I let you, Lord forgive me, but no longer. I'm not sitting on my conscience any longer.*

The telephone rings. Sixsmith snatches it up. “Megan?”
A brusque male voice. “They’re coming.”
“Who is this?”
“They traced your last call to the Talbot Motel, 1046 Olympia Boulevard. Get to the airport *now,* get on the next flight for England, and conduct your exposé from over there, if you must. But go.”
“Why should I believe—”
“Use logic. If I’m lying, you’re still back in England safe and sound—with your report. If I’m not lying, you’re dead.”
“I demand to know—”
“You’ve got twenty minutes to get away, max. *Go!”*
Dial tone, a droning eternity

14

Jerry Nussbaum rotates his office chair, straddles it, places his folded arms on its back, and rests his chin on them. “Picture the scene, me and six dreadlocked freaks of the negroid persuasion, a handgun tickling my tonsils. Not talking dead-of-night Harlem here, I’m talking Greenwich goddamn Village in broad goddamn daylight after a sixteen-pound steak with Norman goddamn Mailer. So there we were, this black bro’ frisks me down with his bitonal paw and relieves me of my wallet. ‘Wassis? *Alligator* skin?’ ” Nuss-baum does a Richard Pryor accent. “ ‘No fuckin’ *class,* Whitey!’ Class? Those bums made me turn out my pockets for my every last cent—*literally*. But Nussbaum had the last laugh, you bet he did. In the cab back to Times Square, I wrote my now-classic ‘New Tribes’ editorial—no point in false modesty—and got it syndicated *thirty* times by the end of the week! My muggers turned me into a household name. So, Luey-Luey what say you take me to dinner and I teach *you* how to extract a little gold from the Fangs of Fate?”
Luisa’s typewriter pings. “If the muggers took your every last cent—*literally*—what were you doing in a *cab* from Greenwich Village to Times Square? Sell your body for the fare?”
“You”—Nussbaum shifts his mass—“have a genius for missing the point.”
Roland Jakes drips candle wax onto a photograph. “Definition of the Week. What’s a conservative?”
The joke is old by summer 1975. “A mugged liberal.”
Jakes, stung, goes back to his picture-doctoring.
Luisa crosses the office to Dom Grelsch’s door. Her boss is speaking on the phone in a low, irate voice. Luisa waits outside but overhears. “No—no, no, Mr. Frum, it *is* black-and-white, tell me— hey, *I*’m talking now—tell me a *more* black-and-white ‘condition’ than leukemia? Know what I think? I think my wife is just one piece of paperwork between you and your three o’clock golf slot, isn’t she? Then prove it to me. Do you have a wife, Mr. Frum? Do you? You do. Can you imagine *your* wife lying in a hospital ward with her hair falling out? … What? *What* did you say? ‘Getting emotional won’t help’? Is that all you can offer, Mr. Frum? Yeah, buddy, you’re damn right I’ll be seeking legal counsel!” Grelsch slams the receiver down, lays into his punching bag gasping “Frum!” with each blow, collapses into his chair, lights a cigarette, and catches sight of Luisa hesitating in his doorway “Life. A Force Ten shitstorm. You hear any of that?”
“The gist. I can come back later.”

"No. Come in, sit down. Are you young, healthy, and strong, Luisa?"
"Yes." Luisa sits on boxes. "Why?"
"Because what I gotta say about your article on this unsubstantiated cover-up at Seaboard will, frankly, leave you old, sick, and weak."

15

At Buenas Yerbas International Airport, Dr. Rufus Sixsmith places a vanilla binder into locker number 909, glances around the crowded concourse, feeds the slot with coins, turns the key, and slips this into a padded khaki envelope addressed to Luisa Rey at *Spyglass,* Klugh Bldg. 12F, 3rd Avenue, BY. Sixsmith's pulse rises as he nears the postal desk. *What if they get me before I reach it?* His pulse rockets. Businessmen, families with luggage carts, snakes of elderly tourists all seem intent on thwarting his progress. The mailbox slot looms closer. Just yards away now, just inches.
The khaki envelope is swallowed and gone. *Godspeed.*
Sixsmith next lines up for an airplane ticket. News of delays lulls him like a litany. He keeps a nervous eye out for signs of Seaboard's agents coming to pick him up at this late hour. Finally, a ticket clerk waves him over.
"I have to get to London. Any destination in the United Kingdom, in fact. Any seat, any airline. I'll pay in cash."
"Not a *prayer,* sir." The clerk's tiredness shows through her makeup. "Earliest I can manage"—she consults a teleprinted sheet— "London Heathrow … tomorrow afternoon, three-fifteen departure, Laker Skytrains, change at JFK."
"It's terribly important that I leave sooner."
"I'm sure it is, sir, but we got air-traffic-control strikes and acres of stranded passengers."
Sixsmith tells himself that not even Seaboard could arrange aviation strikes to detain him.
"Then tomorrow it shall have to be. One-way, business class, please, nonsmoking. Is there overnight accommodation anywhere in the airport?"
"Yes, sir, third level. Hotel Bon Voyage. You'll be comfortable there. If I can just see your passport, please, so I can process your ticketing?"

16

A stained-glass sunset illuminates the velveteen Hemingway in Luisa's apartment. Luisa is buried in *Harnessing the Sun: Two Decades of Peacetime Atomic Power,* chewing a pen. Javier is at her desk doing a sheet of long-division problems. Carole King's *Tapestry* LP is playing at a low volume. Drifting through the windows comes the dim roar of automobiles heading home. The telephone rings, but Luisa lets it. Javier studies the answering machine as it clunks into action. "Hi, Luisa Rey can't come to the phone right now, but if you leave your name and number, I'll get back to you."
"I *loathe* these contraptions," complains the caller. "Cookie, it's your mother. I just heard from Beatty Griffin, who told me you split up with Hal—*last month?* I was dumbstruck! You didn't breathe a word at your father's funeral, or at Alphonse's. This bottling-up worries me so much.

Dougie and I are having a fund-raiser for the American Cancer Society and it'd mean the sun, the moon, and the stars to us if you'd abandon your poky little nest just for one weekend and come stay, Cookie? The Henderson triplets will be here, that's Damien the cardiologist, Lance the gynecologist, and Jesse the … Doug? Doug! Jesse Henderson, what does he do? A lobotomist? *Oh, funny*. Anyway, daughter of mine, Beatty tells me by some freak of planetary alignment all *three* brothers are unattached. On the hoof, Cookie, on the hoof! So *call* the moment you get this. All my love now." She ends with a suction kiss, "Mmmmchw*aaa*!"

"She sounds like the mother on *Bewitched*." Javier lets a little time go by "What's 'dumbstruck'?"

Luisa doesn't look up. "When you're so amazed you can't speak."

"She didn't sound very dumbstruck, did she?"

Luisa is engrossed in her work.

" 'Cookie'?"

Luisa flings a slipper at the boy.

17

In his hotel room at the Bon Voyage, Dr. Rufus Sixsmith reads a sheaf of letters written to him nearly half a century ago by his friend Robert Frobisher. Sixsmith knows them by heart, but their texture, rustle, and his friend's faded handwriting calm his nerves. These letters are what he would save from a burning building. At seven o'clock precisely, he washes, changes his shirt, and sandwiches the nine read letters in the Gideon's Bible—this he replaces in the bedside cabinet. Sixsmith slips the unread letters into his jacket pocket for the restaurant.

Dinner is a minute steak and strips of fried eggplant, with a poorly washed salad. It deadens rather than satisfies Sixsmith's appetite. He leaves half on his plate and sips carbonated water as he reads Frobisher's last letters. He witnesses himself through Robert's words searching Bruges for his unstable friend, first love, and *if I'm honest, my last*.

In the hotel elevator Sixsmith considers the responsibility he put on Luisa Rey's shoulders, wondering if he's done the right thing. The curtains of his room blow in as he opens the door. He calls out, "Who's in here?"

No one. No one knows where you are. His imagination has been playing tricks on him for weeks now. Sleep deprivation. "Look," he tells himself, "in forty-eight hours you'll be back in Cambridge on your rainy, *safe,* narrow island. You'll have your facilities, your allies, your contacts, and you can plan your broadside on Seaboard from there."

18

Bill Smoke watches Rufus Sixsmith leave his hotel room, waits five minutes, then lets himself in. He sits on the rim of the bathtub and flexes his gloved fists. *No drug, no religious experience touches you like turning a man into a corpse. You need a brain, though. Without discipline and expertise, you'll soon find yourself strapped into an electric chair*. The assassin strokes a lucky Krugerrand in his pocket. Smoke is wary of being a slave to superstition, but he isn't about to mess with the amulet just to prove a point. *A tragedy for loved ones, a big fat*

nothing to everyone else, and a problem solved for my clients. I'm just the instrument of my clients' will. If it wasn't me it'd be the next fixer in the Yellow Pages. Blame its user, blame its maker, but don't blame the gun. Bill Smoke hears the lock. *Breathe.* The pills he took earlier clarify his perception, terribly, and when Sixsmith shuffles into the bedroom, humming "Leaving on a Jet Plane," the hit man could swear he can feel his victim's pulse, slower than his own. Smoke sights his prey through the door crack. Sixsmith flumps onto the bed. The assassin visualizes the required motions: *Three steps out, fire from the side, through the temple, up close.* Smoke darts from the doorway; Sixsmith utters a guttural syllable and tries to rise, but the silenced bullet is already boring through the scientist's skull and into the mattress. The body of Rufus Sixsmith falls back, as if he has curled up for a postprandial nap.

Blood soaks into the thirsty eiderdown.

Fulfillment throbs in Bill Smoke's brain. *Look what I did.*

19

Wednesday morning is smog-scorched and heat-hammered, like the last hundred mornings and the next fifty Luisa Rey drinks black coffee in the steamy cool of the Snow White Diner on the corner of Second Avenue and Sixteenth Street, a two-minute walk from the *Spyglass* offices, reading about a Baptist ex–naval nuclear engineer from Atlanta called James Carter, who plans to run for the Democratic nomination. Sixteenth Street traffic moves in frustrated inches and headlong stampedes. The sidewalks blur with hurrying people and skateboarders. "Nothin' for breakfast this mornin', Luisa?" asks Bart, the fry cook.

"Only news," replies his very regular customer.

Roland Jakes trips over the doorway and makes his way to Luisa. "Uh, this seat free? Didn't eat a bite this morning. Shirl's left me. Again."

"Features meeting in fifteen minutes."

"Bags of time." Jakes sits down and orders eggs over easy "Page nine," he says to Luisa. "Right-hand bottom corner. Something you should see."

Luisa turns to page nine and reaches for her coffee. Her hand freezes.

SCIENTIST SUICIDE AT B.Y. INT'L. AIRPORT HOTEL

Eminent British scientist Dr. Rufus Sixsmith was found dead Tuesday morning in his room at Buenas Yerbas International Airport's Hotel Bon Voyage, having taken his own life. Dr. Sixsmith, former head of the Global Atomic Commission, had been employed as a consultant for Seaboard Corporation at the blue-chip utility's Swannekke Island installation outside Buenas Yerbas City for ten months. He was known to have had a lifelong battle with clinical depression, and for the week prior to his death had been incommunicado. Ms. Fay Li, spokeswoman for Seaboard, said, "Dr. Sixsmith's untimely death is a tragedy for the entire international scientific community. We at Seaboard Village on Swannekke Island feel we've lost not just a greatly respected colleague but a very dear friend. Our heartfelt condolences go to his own family and his many friends. He shall be greatly missed." Dr. Six-smith's body, discovered with a single gunshot wound to the head by hotel maids, is being flown home for burial in his native England. A medical examiner at BYPD confirmed there are no suspicious circumstances surrounding the incident.

“So”—Jakes grins—“is your exposé of the century screwed up now?”

Luisa’s skin prickles and her eardrums hurt.

“Whoops.” Jakes lights up a cigarette. “Were you close?”

“He couldn’t”—Luisa fumbles her words—“wouldn’t have done it.”

Jakes approximates gentleness. “Kinda looks like he did, Luisa.”

“You don’t kill yourself if you have a mission.”

“You might if your mission makes you crazy.”

“He was murdered, Jakes.”

Jakes represses a he re-we-go-again face. “Who by?”

“Seaboard Corporation. Of course.”

“Ah. His employer. Of course. Motive?”

Luisa forces herself to speak calmly and ignore Jakes’s mock conviction. “He’d written a report on a reactor type developed at Swannekke B, the HYDRA. Plans for Site C are waiting for Federal Power Commission approval. When it’s approved, Seaboard can license the design for the domestic and overseas market—the government contracts alone would mean a stream of revenue in the high tens of millions, annually. Sixsmith’s role was to give the project his imprimatur, but he hadn’t read the script and identified lethal design flaws. In response, Seaboard buried the report and denied its existence.”

“And your Dr. Sixsmith did what?”

“He was getting ready to go public.” Luisa slaps the newspaper. “This is what the truth cost him.”

Jakes pierces a wobbly dome of yolk with a toast soldier. “You, uh, know what Grelsch is going to say?”

“ ‘Hard evidence,’ ” says Luisa, like a doctor making a diagnosis. “Look, Jakes, will you tell Grelsch … just tell him I had to go somewhere.”

20

The manager at the Hotel Bon Voyage is having a bad day “No, you may *not* see his room! The specialized carpet cleaner has removed all traces of the incident. Who, I add, we had to pay from our own pocket! What kind of ghoul are you, anyway? A reporter? A ghost hunter? A novelist?”

“I’m”—Luisa Rey buckles with sobs from nowhere—“his niece, Megan Sixsmith.”

A stony matriarch enfolds the weeping Luisa in her mountainous bust. Random bystanders shoot the manager foul looks. The manager goes pale and attempts damage control. “Please, come through to the back, I’ll get you a—”

“Glass of water!” snaps the matriarch, knocking the man’s hand away.

“Wendy! Water! Please, through here, why don’t you—”

“A chair, for goodness’ sake!” The matriarch supports Luisa into the shady side office.

“Wendy! A chair! This instant!”

Luisa’s ally clasps her hands. “Let it out, honey, let it out, I’m listening. I’m Janice from

Esphigmenou, Utah, and here is my story When I was your age, I was alone in my house, coming downstairs from my daughter's nursery, and there on the halfway landing stood my mother. 'Go check the baby, Janice,' she said. I told my mother I'd checked her one minute ago, she was sleeping fine. My mother's voice turned to ice. 'Don't argue with me, young lady, go check the baby, *now!'* Sounds crazy, but only then I remembered my mother had died the Thanksgiving before. But I ran upstairs and found my daughter choking on the cord from the blind, wound around her neck. Thirty seconds, that would have been it. So you see?"

Luisa blinks tearfully.

"You see, honey? They pass over, but they ain't gone."

The chastened manager returns with a shoe box. "Your uncle's room is occupied, I'm afraid, but the maid found these letters inside the Gideon's Bible. His name is on the envelope. Naturally, I was going to have them forwarded to your family, but since you're here …"

He hands her a sheaf of nine time-browned envelopes, each addressed to "Rufus Sixsmith, Esq. c/o Caius College, Cambridge, England." One is stained by a very recent tea bag. All are badly crumpled and hastily smoothed out.

"Thank you," says Luisa, vaguely, then more firmly. "Uncle Rufus valued his correspondence, and now it's all I have left of him. I won't take up any more of your time. I'm sorry I fell to pieces out there."

The manager's relief is palpable.

"You're a very special person, Megan," Janice from Esphigme-nou, Utah, assures Luisa, as they part in the hotel lobby.

"You're a very special person, Janice," Luisa replies and returns to the parking level, passing within ten yards of locker number 909.

21

Luisa Rey has been back at *Spyglass's* offices for under a minute when Dom Grelsch roars over the newsroom chatter, *"Miss* Rey!"

Jerry Nussbaum and Roland Jakes look up from their desks, at Luisa, at each other, and mouth, *"Ouch!"* Luisa puts the Frobisher letters into a drawer, locks it, and walks into Grelsch's office. "Dom, sorry I couldn't make the meeting, I—"

"Spare me the woman's trouble excuse. Shut the door."

"I'm not in the habit of making any excuses."

"Are you in the habit of making meetings? You're paid to be."

"I'm also paid to follow up stories."

"So you flew off to the crime scene. Did you find hard evidence missed by the cops? A message, in blood, on the tiles? Alberto Grimaldi did it'?"

"Hard evidence isn't hard evidence if you don't break your back digging for it. An editor named Dom Grelsch told me that."

Grelsch glares at her.

"I got a lead, Dom."

"You got a lead."

I can't batter you, I can't fool you, I can only hook your curiosity. "I phoned the precinct where Sixsmith's case was processed."

"There is no case! It was suicide! Unless we're talking Marilyn Monroe, suicides don't sell magazines. Too depressing."

"Listen to me. Why did Sixsmith buy an airplane ticket if he was going to put a bullet through his head later that day?"
Grelsch extends his arms to show the size of his disbelief that he is even having this conversation. "A snap decision."
"Then why would he have a *typed* suicide note—and no typewriter—ready and waiting for this snap decision?"
"I don't know! I don't care! I got a publication deadline Thursday night, a dispute with the printers, a delivery strike in the offing, and Ogilvy holding the Sword of What's-'is-name over my head. Hold a séance and ask Sixsmith yourself! Sixsmith was a scientist. Scientists are unstable."
"We were trapped in an elevator for ninety minutes. Cool as a cucumber. *Unstable* just isn't a word that sticks to the man. Another thing. He shot himself—supposedly—with just about the quietest gun on the market. A Roachford .34 with fitted silencer. Catalog order only. Why would he go to the trouble?"
"So. The cops got it wrong, the ME got it wrong, everyone got it wrong except Luisa Rey ace cub reporter, whose penetrating insight concludes the world-famous number cruncher was assassinated just because he'd pointed out a few hitches in some report, a report nobody agrees exists. Am I right?"
"Half right. More likely, the police were encouraged to arrive at conclusions convenient for Seaboard."
"Sure, a utility company buys the cops. Stupid me."
"Count in their subsidiaries, Seaboard Corporation is the tenth biggest corporation in the country. They could buy Alaska if they wanted. Give me until Monday."
"No! You got this week's reviews and, yes, the food feature." "If Bob Woodward had told you he suspected President Nixon had ordered a burglary of his political rival's offices *and* recorded himself issuing the order, would you have said, 'Forget it, Bob, honey, I need eight hundred words on salad dressings'?"
"Don't you dare give me the I'm-an-outraged-feminist act." "Then don't give *me* the listen-I've-been-in-the-business-thirty-years act! One Jerry Nussbaum in the building is bad enough."
"You're squeezing size-eighteen reality into a size-eleven supposition. The undoing of many a fine newspaperman. Many a fine anyone."
"Monday! I'll get a copy of the Sixsmith Report." "Promises you can't keep are *not* a sound currency." "Apart from getting on my knees and begging you, I don't have any other currency C'mon. Dom Grelsch doesn't snuff out solid investigative journalism just because it doesn't turn up the goods in one morning. Dad told me you were just about the most daring reporter working *anywhere* in the mid-sixties."
Grelsch swivels and looks over Third Avenue. "Did he *bullshit!"* "He did too bullshit! That exposé on Ross Zinn's campaign funds in 'sixty-four. You took a bone-chilling white supremacist out of politics for good. Dad called you dogged, cussed, and indefatigable. Ross Zinn took nerve, sweat, and time. I'll do the nerve and sweat, all I want from you is a little time." "Roping your pa into this was a dirty trick." "Journalism calls for dirty tricks."
Grelsch stubs his cigarette and lights another. "Monday, *with* Six-smith's inquiry, and it's got to be hurricane proof, Luisa, with names, sources, facts. Who squashed this report, and *why,* and *how* Swan-nekke B will turn Southern California into Hiroshima. Something else. If you get *evidence* Sixsmith was murdered, we're going to the cops before we print. I don't want dynamite under my car seat."
" 'All the news without fear or favor.' "
"Beat it."

Nancy O'Hagan makes a not-bad face as Luisa sits at her desk and takes out Sixsmith's rescued letters.
In his office, Grelsch lays into his punching bag. "Dogged!" Wham! "Cussed!" Wham! "Indefatigable!" The editor catches his reflection, mocking him.

22

A Sephardic romance, composed before the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, fills the Lost Chord Music Store on the northwest corner of Spinoza Square and Sixth Avenue. The well-dressed man on the telephone, pallid for this tanned city repeats the inquiry: *"Cloud Atlas Sextet…* Robert Frobisher … As a matter of fact I *have* heard of it, though I've never laid my sticky paws on an actual pressing…. Frobisher was a wunderkind, he died just as he got going…. Let me see here, I've got a list from a dealer in San Fran who specializes in rarities…. Franck, Fitzroy *Frobisher…* Here we go, even a little footnote…. Only five hundred recordings pressed … in Holland, before the war, my, no wonder it's rare…. The dealer has a copy of an acetate, made in the fifties … by a liquidated French outfit. *Cloud Atlas Sextet* must bring the kiss of death to all who take it on…. I'll try, he had one as of a month ago, but no promises on the sound quality and I must warn you, cheap it *ain't…*. It's quoted here at … one hundred twenty dollars … plus our commission at ten percent, that makes … It is? Okay, I'll take your name down…. Ray who? Oh, Miss R-E-Y, so sorry. Normally we ask for a deposit, but you've got an honest voice. A few days. You're welcome now." The store clerk scribbles himself a to-do note and lifts the stylus back to the start of "¿Por qué lloras blanca niña?," lowers the needle onto shimmering black vinyl, and dreams of Jewish shepherd boys plucking their lyres on starlit Iberian hillsides.

23

Luisa Rey doesn't see the dusty black Chevy coasting by as she enters her apartment building.
Bill Smoke, driving the Chevy memorizes the address: 108, Pacific Eden Apartments.
Luisa has reread Sixsmith's letters a dozen times or more in the last day and a half. They disturb her. A university friend of Six-smith's, Robert Frobisher, wrote the series in the summer of 1931 during a prolonged stay at a château in Belgium. It is not the unflattering light they shed on a pliable young Rufus Sixsmith that bothers Luisa but the dizzying vividness of the images of places and people that the letters have unlocked. Images so vivid she can only call them memories. The pragmatic journalist's daughter would, and did, explain these "memories" as the work of an imagination hypersensitized by her father's recent death, but a detail in one letter will not be dismissed. Robert Frobisher mentions a comet-shaped birthmark between his shoulder blade and collarbone.
I just don't believe in this crap. I just don't believe it. I don't.
Builders are remodeling the lobby of Pacific Eden Apartments. Sheets are on the floor, an electrician is prodding a light fitting, an unseen hammerer hammers. Malcolm the super glimpses Luisa and calls out, "Hey, Luisa! An uninvited guest ran up to your apartment twenty minutes ago!" But the noise of a drill drowns him out, he has a man from city hall on the phone

about building codes, and anyway, Luisa has already stepped into the elevator.

24

"Surprise," says Hal Brodie, drily, caught in the act of taking books and records from Luisa's shelves and putting them into his gym bag. "Hey," he says, to hide a jab of guilt, "you've had your hair cut short."

Luisa isn't very surprised. "Don't all dumped women?"

Hal clicks in the back of his throat.

Luisa is angry with herself. "So. Reclamation Day."

"Just about done." Hal brushes imaginary dust off his hands. "Is the selected Wallace Stevens yours or mine?"

"It was a Christmas present from Phoebe to us. Phone Phoebe. Let her decide. Or else rip out the odd pages and leave me the even. This is like a no-knock raid. You could've phoned."

"I did. All I got was your machine. Junk it, if you never listen to it."

"Don't be stupid, it cost a fortune. So what brings you up to town, apart from your love of modernist poetry?"

"Location scouting for *Starsky and Hutch."*

"Starsky and Hutch don't live in Buenas Yerbas."

"Starsky gets kidnapped by the West Coast Triad. There's a gunfight on Buenas Yerbas Bay Bridge, and we've got a chase scene scripted with David and Paul running over car roofs at rush hour. It'll be a headache to okay it with the traffic cops, but we need to do it on location or we'll lose any semblance of artistic integrity"

"Hey. You're not taking *Blood on the Tracks."*

"It's mine."

"Not anymore." Luisa is not joking.

With ironic deference, Brodie takes out the record from the gym bag. "Look, I was sorry to hear about your dad."

Luisa nods, feels grief rise and her defenses stiffen. "Yeah."

"I guess it was … a release, of sorts."

True, but only the bereaved can actually say so. Luisa resists the temptation to say something acidic. She remembers her father ribbing Hal, "the TV Kid." *I am* not *going to start crying.*

"So, you're doing okay?"

"I'm doing fine. And you?"

"Fine." Luisa looks at the new gaps in her old shelves.

"Work's good?"

"Work's fine." *Put us both out of our misery.* "I believe you have a key that belongs to me."

Hal zips up his gym bag, fishes in his pocket, and drops the door key onto her palm. With a flourish, to underline the symbolism of the act. Luisa smells an alien aftershave and imagines *Her* splashing it on him this morning. *He didn't own that shirt eight weeks ago, either.* The cowboy boots they'd bought together the day of the Segovia concert. Hal steps over a pair of Javier's filthy sneakers, and Luisa watches him think better of making a funny about her new man. Instead, he just says, "So long, then."

Shake hands? Hug him? "Yeah."

The door closes.

Luisa puts the chain on and replays the encounter. She turns on the shower and undresses. Her

bathroom mirror is half-hidden by a shelf of shampoos, conditioners, a box of sanitary napkins, skin creams, and gift soaps. Luisa shunts these aside to get a clearer view of a birthmark between her shoulder blade and collarbone. Her encounter with Hal is displaced. *Coincidences happen all the time*. But it is undeniably shaped like a comet. The mirror mists over. *Facts are* your *bread and butter*. *Birthmarks can look like anything you choose, not only comets*. *You're still upset by Dad's death, that's all*. The journalist steps into the shower, but her mind walks the passageways of Zedelghem château.

The Swannekke Island protesters' camp lies on the mainland between a beach and a marshy lagoon. Behind the lagoon, acres of citrus orchards rise inland to arid hills. Tatty tents, rainbow-sprayed camper vans, and trailer homes look like unwanted gifts the Pacific dumped here. A strung banner declares: PLANET AGAINST SEABOARD. On the far side of the bridge sits Swannekke A, quivering like Utopia in a noon mirage. White toddlers tanned brown as leather paddle in the lazy shallows; a bearded apostle washes clothes in a tub; a couple of snaky teenagers kiss in the dune grass.

Luisa locks her VW and crosses the scrub to the encampment. Seagulls float in the joyless heat. Agricultural machinery drones in the distance. Several inhabitants approach but not in a friendly manner. "Yeah?" challenges a man, with a hawkish Native American complexion.

"I presumed this was a public park."

"You presumed wrong. It's private."

"I'm a journalist. I was hoping to interview a few of you."

"Who do you work for?"

"Spyglass magazine."

The bad weather lightens a little. "Shouldn't you be writing about the latest adventures of Barbra Streisand's nose?" says the Native American, adding a sardonic "No disrespect."

"Well, sorry, I'm not the *Herald Tribune,* but why not give me a chance? You could use a little positive coverage, unless you're seriously planning to dismantle that atomic time bomb across the water by waving placards and strumming protest songs. No disrespect."

A southerner growls: "Lady, you're *full* of it."

"The interview's over," says the Native American. "Get off this land."

"Don't worry, Milton"—an elderly, white-haired, russet-faced woman stands on her trailer's step—"I'll see this one." An aristocratic mongrel watches from beside his mistress. Clearly, her word carries weight, for the crowd disperses with no further protest.

Luisa approaches the trailer. "The love and peace generation?"

"Nineteen seventy-five is nowhere *near* 1968. Seaboard has informers in our network. Last weekend the authorities wanted to clear the site for the VIPs, and blood was spilled. That gave the cops an excuse for a round of arrests. I'm afraid paranoia pays. Come in. I'm Hester Van Zandt."

"I was very much hoping to meet you, Doctor," says Luisa.

An hour later Luisa feeds her apple core to Hester Van Zandt's genteel dog. Van Zandt's bookshelf-lined office is as neat as Grelsch's is chaotic. Luisa's host is finishing up. "The conflict between corporations and activists is that of narcolepsy versus remembrance. The corporations have money, power, and influence. Our sole weapon is public outrage. Outrage blocked the Yuccan Dam, ousted Nixon, and in part, terminated the monstrosities in Vietnam. But outrage is unwieldy to manufacture and handle. First, you need scrutiny; second, widespread awareness; only when this reaches a critical mass does public outrage explode into being. Any stage may be sabotaged. The world's Alberto Grimaldis can fight scrutiny by burying truth in committees, dullness, and misinformation, or by intimidating the scrutinizers. They can extinguish awareness by dumbing down education, owning TV stations, paying 'guest fees' to leader writers, or just buying the media up. The media—and not just *The Washington Post*—is where democracies conduct their civil wars."

"That's why you rescued me from Milton and his compatriots."

"I wanted to give you the truth as we see it, so you can at least make an informed choice about which side you'll back. Write a satire about GreenFront New Waldenites in their mini-Woodstock and you'll confirm every Republican Party prejudice and bury truth a little deeper. Write about radiation levels in seafood, 'safe' pollution limits set by polluters, government policy auctioned for campaign donations, and Seaboard's private police force, and you'll raise the temperature of public awareness, fractionally, toward its ignition point."

Luisa asks, "Did you know Rufus Sixsmith?"

"I certainly did, God rest his soul."

"I'd have put you on opposing sides … or no?"

Van Zandt nods at Luisa's tactics. "I met Rufus in the early sixties at a think tank in D.C., connected with the Federal Power Commission. I was in awe of him! Nobel laureate, veteran of the Manhattan Project."

"Might you know anything about a report he wrote condemning the HYDRA-Zero and demanding Swannekke B be taken off-line?"

"Dr. Sixsmith? Are you totally sure?"

" 'Totally sure'? No. 'Pretty damn sure'? Yes."

Van Zandt looks edgy. "My God, if GreenFront could get its hands on a copy …" Her face clouds over. "If *the* Dr. Rufus Sixsmith wrote a hatchet job on the HYDRA-Zero, and *if* he threatened to go public, well, I no longer believe he shot himself."

Luisa notices they are both whispering. She asks the question she imagines Grelsch asking: "Doesn't it smack of paranoia to believe Seaboard would assassinate a man of Sixsmith's stature, just to avoid negative publicity?"

Van Zandt removes a photograph of a woman in her seventies from a corkboard. "A name for you. Margo Roker."

"I saw her name on a placard the other day."

"Margo's been a GreenFront activist since Seaboard bought Swannekke Island. She owns this land and lets us operate here as a thorn in Seaboard's side. Six weeks ago her bungalow—two miles up the coast—was burgled. Margo has no money, just a few scraps of land, land she's refused to part with, whatever inducements Seaboard dangled. Well. The burglars beat her senseless, left her for dead, but took nothing. It's not actually a murder case, because Margo's still in a coma, so the police line is that it was a poorly planned heist with an unfortunate end."

"Unfortunate for Margo."

"And pretty damn fortunate for Seaboard. The medical bills are burying her family. A few days after the assault, an LA. real estate company, Open Vista, steps up and makes an offer to

Margo's cousin for these acres of coastland scrub at quadruple its market value. To make a private nature reserve. So I ask GreenFront to do some research on Open Vista. It was registered just eight weeks ago, and guess whose name heads the list of corporate donors?" Van Zandt nods in the direction of Swannekke Island.

Luisa weighs all this. "You'll be hearing from me, Hester."

"I hope I will."

27

Alberto Grimaldi enjoys his Extracurricular Security Briefings with Bill Smoke and Joe Napier in his Swannekke office. He likes the no-nonsense demeanor of both men, in contrast to the retinue of courtiers and petitioners. He likes sending his secretary into the reception area where company heads, union leaders, and government men are made to wait, ideally for hours, and hear her say, "Bill, Joe, Mr. Grimaldi has a slot for you now." Smoke and Napier let Grimaldi indulge the J. Edgar Hoover side of his character. He thinks of Napier as a steadfast bulldog whose New Jersey childhood is unsoftened by thirty-five years of Californian living; Bill Smoke is his familiar, who passes through walls, ethics, and legality to execute his master's will.

Today's meeting is enhanced by Fay Li, summoned by Napier for the last item on their unwritten agenda: a journalist visiting Swannekke this weekend, Luisa Rey who may or may not pose a security risk. "So, Fay," asks Grimaldi, balancing on the edge of his desk, "what do we know about her?"

Fay Li speaks as if from a mental checklist. "Reporter at *Spyglass*—I presume we all know it? Twenty-six, ambitious, more liberal than radical. Daughter of *the* Lester Rey, foreign correspondent, recently died. Mother remarried an architect after an *amicable* divorce seven years ago, lives in uptown Ewingsville, B.Y. No siblings. History and economics at Berkeley, summa cum laude. Started on the *L.A. Recorder,* political pieces in the *Tribune* and *Herald*. Single, lives alone, pays her bills on time."

"Dull as ditch water," comments Napier.

"Then remind me why we're discussing her," says Smoke.

Fay Li addresses Grimaldi: "We caught her wandering around Research on Tuesday, during the launch. She claimed to have an appointment with Dr. Sixsmith."

"About?"

"A commissioned piece for *Spyglass,* but I think she was fishing."

The CEO looks at Napier, who shrugs. "Difficult to read, Mr. Grimaldi. If she was fishing, we should assume she knows what sort of fish she was after."

Grimaldi has a weakness for spelling out the obvious. "The report."

"Journalists have feverish imaginations," says Li, "especially hungry young ones looking for their first big scoop. I suppose she *might* think Dr. Sixsmith's death could be … How can I put this?"

Alberto Grimaldi makes a puzzled face.

"Mr. Grimaldi," fills in Smoke, "what I believe Fay has too much tact to spit out is this: the Rey woman might be imagining we rubbed out Dr. Sixsmith."

" 'Rubbed out'? Good God. Really? Joe? What do you think?"

Napier spreads his palms. "Fay might be right, Mr. Grimaldi. *Spyglass* isn't known for keeping its feet firmly rooted in fact."

"Do we have any leverage with the magazine?" asks Grimaldi.
Napier shakes his head. "I'll get on it."
"She phoned," continues Li, "asking if she could interview a few of our people for a day-in-the-life-of-a-scientist piece. So I invited her to the hotel for tonight's banquet and promised to make a few introductions over the weekend. In fact"—she glances at her watch—"I'm meeting her there in an hour."
"I okayed it, Mr. Grimaldi," says Napier. "I'd rather have her snooping under our noses, where we can watch her."
"Quite right, Joe. Quite right. Assess how much of a threat she poses. And lay to rest any morbid suspicions about poor Rufus at the same time." Tight smiles all around. "Well, Fay, Joe, that's a wrap, thanks for your time. Bill, a word on some matters in Toronto."
The CEO and his fixer are left alone.
"Our friend," begins Grimaldi, "Lloyd Hooks. He worries me."
Bill Smoke considers this. "Any angles?"
"He's got a spring like he's holding four aces. I don't like it. Watch him."
Bill Smoke inclines his head.
"And you'd better have an accident up your sleeve for Luisa Rey Your work at the airport was exemplary, but Sixsmith was a distinguished foreign national, and we don't want this woman to dig out any rumors of foul play" He nods after Napier and Li. "Do those two suspect anything about Sixsmith?"
"Li isn't thinking anything. She's a PR woman, period. Napier's not looking. There's the blind, Mr. Grimaldi, there's the willfully blind, and then there's the soon to be retired."

28

Isaac Sachs sits hunched in the bay window of the Swannekke Hotel bar and watches yachts in the creamy evening blues. A beer stands untouched on the table. The scientist's thoughts run from Rufus Sixsmith's death to the fear that his secreted-away copy of the Sixsmith Report might be found, to Napier's warning about confidentiality *The deal is, Dr. Sachs, your ideas are the property of Seaboard Corporation. You don't want to welch on a deal with a man like Mr. Grimaldi, do you?* Clumsy but effective.
Sachs tries to remember how it felt not to walk around with this knot in his gut. He longs for his old lab in Connecticut, where the world was made of mathematics, energy, and atomic cascades, and he was its explorer. He has no business in these political orders of magnitude, where erroneous loyalties can get your brain spattered over hotel bedrooms. *You'll shred that report, Sachs, page by goddamn page.*
Then his thoughts slide to a hydrogen buildup, an explosion, packed hospitals, the first deaths by radiation poisoning. The official inquiry. The scapegoats. Sachs bangs his knuckles together. So far, his betrayal of Seaboard is a thought-crime, not one of action. *Dare I cross that line?* The hotel manager leads a bevy of florists into the banquet hall. A woman saunters downstairs, looks for someone who hasn't yet arrived, and drifts into the lively bar. Sachs admires her well-chosen suede suit, her svelte figure, her quiet pearls. The barman pours her a glass of white wine and makes a joke that earns an acknowledgment but not a smile. She turns his way, and he recognizes the woman he mistook for Megan Sixsmith five days ago: the knot of fear yanks tight, and Sachs hurries out via the veranda, keeping his face averted.
Luisa wanders over to the bay window. An untouched beer sits on the table, but there's no sign

of its owner, so she sits down on the warmed seat. It's the best seat in the house. She watches yachts in the creamy evening blues.

29

Alberto Grimaldi's gaze wanders the candlelit banquet hall. The room bubbles with sentences more spoken than listened to. His own speech got more and longer laughs than that of Lloyd Hooks, who now sits in sober consultation with Grimaldi's vice CEO, William Wiley. *Now, what is that pair discussing so intently?* Grimaldi jots another mental memo for Bill Smoke. The head of the Environmental Protection Agency is telling him an interminable story about Henry Kissinger's schooldays, so Grimaldi addresses an imaginary audience on the subject of power.

"Power. *What do we mean? 'The ability to determine another man's luck.' You men of science, building tycoons, and opinion formers: my jet could take off from LaGuardia, and before I touched down in B.Y. you'd be a nobody. You Wall Street moguls, elected officials, judges, I might need more time to knock you off your perches, but your eventual downfall would be just as total."* Grimaldi checks with the EPA man to ensure his attention isn't being missed—it isn't. *"Yet how is it some men attain mastery over others while the vast majority live and die as minions, as livestock? The answer is a holy trinity. First: God-given gifts of charisma. Second: the discipline to nurture these gifts to maturity, for though humanity's topsoil is fertile with talent, only one seed in ten thousand will ever flower—for want of discipline."* Grimaldi glimpses Fay Li steer the troublesome Luisa Rey to a circle where Spiro Agnew holds court. The reporter is prettier in the flesh than her photograph: *So that's how she noosed Sixsmith.* He catches Bill Smoke's eye. *"Third: the* will *to power. This is the enigma at the core of the various destinies of men. What drives some to accrue power where the majority of their compatriots lose, mishandle, or eschew power? Is it addiction? Wealth? Survival? Natural selection? I propose these are all pretexts and results, not the root cause. The only answer can be 'There is no "Why" This is our nature.' 'Who and 'What' run deeper than 'Why'"*

The head of the Environmental Protection Agency quakes with mirth at his own punch line. Grimaldi chuckles through his teeth. "A killer, Tom, an absolute *killer."*

30

Luisa Rey plays the ditzy reporter on her best behavior to assure Fay Li she poses no threat. Only then might she be given a free enough rein to sniff out Sixsmith's fellow dissidents. Joe Napier, head of Security reminds Luisa of her father—quiet, sober, similar age and hair loss. Once or twice during the sumptuous ten-course meal she caught him watching her thoughtfully. "And, Fay, you never feel confined on Swannekke Island, at all?"

"Swannekke? It's paradise!" enthuses the publicist. "Buenas Yerbas only an hour away, LA. down the coast, my family up in San Francisco, it's ideal. Subsidized stores and utilities, free clinic, clean air, zero crime, sea views. Even the men," she confides, sotto voce, "come ready-vetted—in fact I can access their personnel files—so you know there won't be any total freaks

in the dating pool. Speaking of which—Isaac! Isaac! You're being conscripted." Fay Li grabs Isaac Sachs's elbow. "You'll remember bumping into Luisa Rey the other day?"
"I'm one lucky conscript. Hi, Luisa, again."
Luisa feels an edginess in his handshake.
"Miss Rey is here," says Fay Li, "to write an article on Swannekke anthropology."
"Oh? We're a dull tribe. I hope you'll meet your word count."
Fay Li turns her beam on full. "I'm sure Isaac could find a little time to answer any of your questions, Luisa. Rght, Isaac?"
"I'm the very dullest of the dull."
"Don't believe him, Luisa," Fay Li warns her. "It's just a part of Isaac's strategy. Once your defenses are down, he pounces."
The alleged lady-killer rocks on his heels, smiling at his toes uncomfortably

31

"Isaac Sachs's tragic flaw," analyzes Isaac Sachs, slumped in the bay window across from Luisa Rey two hours later, "is this. Too cowardly to be a warrior, but not *enough* of a coward to lie down and roll over like a good doggy." His words slip like Bambi on ice. A mostly empty wine bottle stands on the table. The bar is deserted. Sachs can't remember when he was last this drunk, or this tense and relaxed at the same time: relaxed, because an intelligent young woman is enjoying his company; tense, because he is ready to lance the boil on his conscience. To Sachs's wry surprise, he is attracted to Luisa Rey, and he sorely regrets they met in these circumstances. The woman and the reporter keep blurring into one another. "Let's change the subject," Sachs says. "Your car, your"—he does a Hollywood SS officer accent—" *'Volkswagen.'* What's its name?"
"How do you know my Beetle has a name?"
"All Beetle owners give their cars names. But please don't tell me it's John, George, Paul, or Ringo." *God, Luisa Rey, you're beautiful.*
She says, "You'll laugh."
"I won't."
"You will."
"I, Isaac Caspar Sachs, solemnly vow not to laugh."
"You'd better not with a middle name like Caspar. It's Garcia."
They both shake, noiselessly, until they burst into laughter. *Maybe she likes me too, maybe she's not just doing her job.*
Luisa lassos her laughter in. "Is that all your vows are worth?"
Sachs makes a mea culpa gesture and dabs his eyes. "They normally last longer. I don't know why it's so funny, I mean, Garcia"— he snorts—"isn't such a funny name. I once dated a girl who called her car Rosinante, for Chrissakes."
"An ex-Berserkeley Beatnik boyfriend named it. After Jerry Garcia, y' know, the Grateful Dead man. He abandoned it at my dorm when its engine sent a gasket through the back around the time he dumped me for a cheerleader. Cheesy, but true."
"And you didn't take a blowtorch to it?"
"It's not Garcia's fault his ex-owner was a swindling sperm gun."
"The guy must have been mad." Sachs didn't plan to say so, but he's not ashamed he did.
Luisa Rey nods in gracious acknowledgment. "Anyway Garcia suits the car. Never stays

tuned, prone to flashes of speed, falling to bits, its trunk won't lock, it leaks oil, but never seems to give up the ghost."

Invite her back, Sachs thinks. *Don't be stupid, you're not a pair of kids.*

They watch the breakers crash in the moonlight.

Say it. "The other day"—his voice is a murmur and he feels sick—"you were looking for something in Sixsmith's room." The shadows seem to prick up their ears. "Weren't you?"

Luisa checks for eavesdroppers and speaks very quietly "I understand Dr. Sixsmith wrote a certain report."

"Rufus had to work closely with the team who designed and built the thing. That meant me."

"Then you know what his conclusions were? About the HYDRA reactor?"

"We all do! Jessops, Moses, Keene … they all know."

"About a design flaw?"

"Yes." *Nothing has changed, except everything.*

"How bad would an accident be?"

"If Dr. Sixsmith is right, it'll be much, much worse than bad."

"Why isn't Swannekke B just shut down pending further inquiry?"

"Money, power, usual suspects."

"Do you agree with Sixsmith's findings?"

Carefully. "I agree a substantial theoretical risk is present."

"Were you pressured to keep your doubts to yourselves?"

"Every scientist was. Every scientist agreed to. Except for Six-smith."

"Who, Isaac? Alberto Grimaldi? Does it go up to the top?"

"Luisa, what would you *do* with a copy of the report, *if* 'one found its way into your hands?"

"Go public as fast as I possibly could."

"Are you *aware* of …" *I can't say it.*

"Aware that people in the upper echelons would rather see me dead than see HYDRA discredited? Right now it's all I'm aware of."

"I can't make any promises." *Christ, how feeble.* "I became a scientist because … it's like panning for gold in a muddy torrent. Truth is the gold. I—I don't know what I want to do …"

"Journalists work in torrents just as muddy"

The moon is over the water.

"Do," says Luisa finally "whatever you can't *not* do."

32

In blustery early sunshine Luisa Rey watches golfers traverse the lush course, wondering what might have happened last night if she'd invited Isaac Sachs up. He's due to meet her for breakfast.

She wonders if she should have phoned Javier. *You're not his mother, you're not his guardian, you're just a neighbor.* She's not convinced, but just as she didn't know how to ignore the boy she found sobbing by the garbage chute, just as she couldn't *not* go down to the super's, borrow his keys, and pick through a garbage can for his precious stamp albums, now she doesn't know how to extricate herself. He hasn't got anyone else, and eleven-year-olds don't do subtlety *Anyway, who else have* you *got*?

"You look like you got the weight of the world," says Joe Napier.

"Joe. Have a seat."

"Don't mind if I do. I'm the bearer of bad news. Isaac Sachs sends his sincere apologies, but he's got to stand you up."
"Oh?"
"Alberto Grimaldi flew out to our Three Mile Island site this morning—wooing a group of Germans. Sidney Jessops was going along as the technical support, but Sid's father had a heart attack, and Isaac was the next choice."
"Oh. Has he left already?"
"Afraid so. He's"—Napier checks his watch—"over the Colorado Rockies. Breast-feeding a hangover, shouldn't wonder."
Don't let your disappointment show. "When's he due back?"
"Tomorrow morning."
"Oh." *Damn, damn, damn*.
"I'm twice Isaac's age and three times uglier, but Fay's asked me to show you around the site. She's scheduled a few interviews with some people she thinks'll interest you."
"Joe, it's too kind of you all to give me such generous slices of your weekends," says Luisa. *Did you know Sachs was on the verge of defection? How? Unless Sachs was a plant? I'm out of my depth here*.
"I'm a lonely old man with too much time on my hands."

33

"So R & D is called the Chicken Coop because the eggheads live there." Luisa jots in her notebook, smiling, as Joe Napier holds open the control-room door two hours later. "What do you call the reactor building?"
A gum-chewing technician calls out: "Home of the Brave."
Joe's expression *says funny*. "That's *definitely* off the record."
"Has Joe told you what we call the security wing?" The controller grins.
Luisa shakes her head.
"Planet of the Apes." He turns to Napier. "Introduce your guest, Joe."
"Carlo Böhn, Luisa Rey Luisa's a reporter, Carlo's a chief technician. Stick around and you'll hear plenty of other names for him."
"Let me show you around my little empire, if Joe'll give you up for five minutes."
Napier watches Luisa as Böhn explains the fluorescent-lit chamber of panels and gauges. Underlings check printouts, frown at dials, tick clipboards. Böhn flirts with her, catches Napier's eye, when Luisa's back is turned, and mimes melon-breasts; Napier shakes his sober head. *Milly would have clucked over you,* he thinks. *Had you over for dinner, fed you way too much, and nagged you on what you need to be nagged about*. He recalls Luisa as a precocious little six-year-old. *Must be two decades since I saw you at the last Tenth Precinct Station reunion. Of all the professions that lippy little girl could have entered, of all the reporters who could have caught the scent of Sixsmith's death, why Lester Rey's daughter? Why so soon before I retire? Who dreamed up this sick joke? The city?* Napier could cry.

Fay Li searches Luisa Rey's room swiftly and adeptly as the sun sets. She checks inside the toilet cistern; under the mattress for slits; the carpets, for loose flaps; inside the minibar; in the closet. The original might have been Xeroxed down to a quarter of its bulk. Li's tame receptionist reported Sachs and Luisa talking until the early hours. Sachs was removed this morning, but he's no idiot, he could have deposited it for her. She unscrews the telephone mouthpiece and finds Napier's favored transmitter, one disguised as a resistor. She probes the recesses of Luisa's overnight bag but finds no printed matter except *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. She flicks through the reporter's notepad on the desk, but Luisa's encrypted shorthand doesn't reveal much.

Fay Li wonders if she's wasting her time. *Wasting your time? Mexxon Oil upped their offer to one hundred thousand dollars for the Sixsmith Report. And if they're serious about a hundred thousand, they'll be serious about a million. For discrediting the entire atomic energy program into an adolescent grave, a million is a snip. So keep searching.*

The phone buzzes four times: a warning that Luisa Rey is in the lobby, waiting for the elevator. Li ensures nothing is amiss and leaves, taking the stairs down. After ten minutes she rings up to Luisa from the front desk. "Hi, Luisa, it's Fay. Been back long?"

"Just long enough for a quick shower."

"Productive afternoon, I hope?"

"Very much so. I've got enough material for two or three pieces."

"Terrific. Listen, unless you've got other plans, how about dinner at the golf club? Swannekke lobster is the best this side of anywhere."

"Quite a claim."

"I'm not asking you to take *my* word for it."

35

Crustacean shrapnel is piled high. Luisa and Fay Li dab their fingers in pots of lemon-scented water, and Li's eyebrow tells the waiter to remove the plates. "What a *mess* I've made." Luisa drops her napkin. "I'm the slob of the class, Fay You should open a finishing school for young ladies in Switzerland."

"That's not how most people in Seaboard Village see me. Did anyone tell you my nickname? No? Mr. Li."

Luisa isn't sure what response is expected. "A little context might help."

"My first week on the job, I'm up in the canteen, fixing myself a coffee. This engineer comes up, tells me he's got a problem of a mechanical nature, and asks if I can help. His buddies are sniggering in the background. I say, 'I doubt it.' The guy says, 'Sure you can help.' He wants me to oil his bolt and relieve the excess pressure on his nuts."

"This engineer was how old? Thirteen?"

"Forty married, two kids. So his buddies are snorting with laughter now. What would you do? Dash off some witty put-down line, let 'em know you're riled? Slap him, get labeled hysterical? Besides, creeps like that enjoy being slapped. Do nothing? So any man on site can say shit like that to you with impunity?"

"An official complaint?"

"Prove that women run to senior men when the going gets tough?"

"So what did you do?"
"Had him transferred to our Kansas plant. Middle of nowhere, middle of January. I pity his wife, but she married him. Word gets around, I get dubbed Mr. Li. A real woman wouldn't have treated the poor guy so cruelly, no, a real woman would have taken his joke as a compliment." Fay Li smooths wrinkles in the tablecloth. "You run up against this crap in your work?"
Luisa thinks of Nussbaum and Jakes. "All the time."
"Maybe our daughters'll live in a liberated world, but us, forget it. We've got to help ourselves, Luisa. Men won't do it for us."
The journalist senses a shifting of the agenda.
Fay Li leans in. "I hope you'll consider me your own insider here on Swannekke Island."
Luisa probes with caution. "Journalists need insiders, Fay, so I'll certainly bear it in mind. I have to warn you, though, *Spyglass* doesn't have the resources for the kind of remuneration you may be—"
"Men invented money Women invented mutual aid."
It's a wise soul, thinks Luisa, *who can distinguish traps from opportunities*. "I'm not sure … how a small-time reporter could 'aid' a woman of your standing, Fay."
"Don't underestimate yourself. Friendly journalists make valuable allies. If there comes a time when you want to discuss any matters weightier than how many french fries the Swannekke engineers consume per annum"—her voice sinks below the clinking of cutlery, cocktail-bar piano music, and background laughter— "such as data on the HYDRA reactor as compiled by Dr. Sixsmith, purely for example, I guarantee you'll find me *much* more cooperative than you think."
Fay Li clicks her fingers, and the dessert trolley is already on its way. "Now, the lemon-and-melon sherbet, *very* low in calories, it cleanses the palate, ideal before coffee. Trust me on this?"
The transformation is so total, Luisa almost wonders if she just heard what she just heard. "I'll trust you on this."
"Glad we understand each other."
Luisa wonders: *What level of deceit is permissible in journalism?* She remembers her father's answer, one afternoon in the hospital garden: *Did I ever lie to get my story? Ten-mile-high whoppers every day before breakfast, f it got me one* inch *closer to the truth.*

36

A ringing phone flips Luisa's dreams over and she lands in the moonlit room. She grabs the lamp, the clock radio, and finally the receiver. For a moment she cannot remember her name or what bed she is in. "Luisa?" offers a voice from the black gulf.
"Yeah, Luisa Rey."
"Luisa, it's me, Isaac, Isaac Sachs, calling long distance."
"Isaac! Where are you? What time is it? Why—"
"Shush, shush, sorry I woke you, and sorry I was dragged away at the crack of dawn yesterday. Listen, I'm in Philadelphia. It's seven-thirty eastern, it'll be getting light soon in California. You still there, Luisa? I haven't lost you?"
He's afraid. "Yeah, Isaac, I'm listening."
"Before I left Swannekke, I gave Garcia a present to give to you, just a *dolce far niente."* He

tries to make the sentence sound casual. "Understand?"
What in God's name is he talking about?
"You hear me, Luisa? Garcia has a present for you."
A more alert quarter of Luisa's brain muscles in. *Isaac Sachs left the Sixsmith Report in your VW. You mentioned the trunk didn't lock. He assumes we are being eavesdropped.* "That's very kind of you, Isaac. Hope it didn't cost you too much."
"Worth every cent. Sorry to disturb your beauty sleep."
"Have a safe flight, and see you soon. Dinner, maybe?"
"I'd love that. Well, got a plane to catch."
"Safe flight." Luisa hangs up.
Leave later, in an orderly fashion? Or get off Swannekke right now?

37

A quarter of a mile across the science village, Joe Napier's window frames the hour-before-dawn night sky. A console of electronic monitoring equipment occupies half the room. From a loudspeaker the sound of a dead phone line purrs. Napier rewinds a squawking reel-to-reel. "Before I left Swannekke, I gave Garcia a present to give to you, just a *dolce far niente*…. Understand?"
Garcia? Garcia?
Napier grimaces at his cold coffee and opens a folder labeled "LR#2." Colleagues, friends, contacts … no Garcia in the index. *Better warn Bill Smoke not to approach Luisa until I've had the chance to speak with her*. He flicks his lighter into life. *Bill Smoke is a difficult man to find, let alone warn*. Napier draws acrid smoke down into his lungs. His telephone rings: it's Bill Smoke. "So, who the fuck's this Garcia?"
"Don't know, nothing on file. Listen, I don't want you to—"
"It's your fucking job to know, Napier."
So, you're addressing me like that now? "Hey! Hold your—"
"Hey yourself." Bill Smoke hangs up.
Bad, bad, very bad. Joe grabs his jacket, snuffs his cigarette, leaves his quarters, and strides across the site to Luisa's hotel. A five-minute walk. He recalls the menace in Bill Smoke's tone and breaks into a run.

38

A swarm of déjà vu haunts Luisa as she stuffs her belongings into her overnight bag. *Robert Frobisher doing a dine and dash from another hotel*. She takes the stairs down to the empty lobby. The carpet is silent as snow. A radio whispers sweet nothings in the back office. Luisa creeps to the main doors, hoping to leave with no explanation required. The doors are locked to keep people out, not in, and soon Luisa is striding across the hotel lawn to the parking lot. A predawn ocean breeze makes vague promises. The night sky inland is turning dark rose. Nobody else is about, but as she nears her car, Luisa forces herself not to break into a run. *Stay calm, unhurried, and you can say you're driving along the cape for the sunrise*.

At first glance the trunk is empty, but the carpet covers a bulge. Under the flap Luisa finds a package wrapped in a black plastic trash bag. She removes a vanilla binder. She reads its cover in the semilight: *The HYDRAZero Reactor—An Operational Assessment Model— Project Head Dr. Rufus Sixsmith—Unauthorized Possession Is a Federal Crime Under the Military & Industrial Espionage Act 1971*. Some five hundred pages of tables, flowcharts, mathematics, and evidence. A sense of elation booms and echoes. *Steady, this is only the end of the beginning*.

Motion in the middle distance catches Luisa's eye. A man. Luisa ducks behind Garcia. "Hey! Luisa! Hold it!" *Joe Napier!* As if in a dream of keys and locks and doors, Luisa stows the vanilla binder in its black trash bag under the passenger seat—Napier is running now, his flashlight beam swishing the half darkness. The engine makes a lazy, leonine roar—the VW reverses too fast. Joe Napier thumps into the back, yells, and Luisa glimpses him hopping like a slapstick actor.

She does not stop to apologize.

39

Bill Smoke's dusty black Chevy skids to a stop by the island checkpoint of Swannekke Bridge. A string of lights dots the mainland across the straits. The guard recognizes the car and is already by its driver's window. "Good morning, sir!"

"Looking that way Richter, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mr. Smoke."

"I'm guessing Joe Napier has just called you and ordered you not to let an orange VW pass the checkpoint."

"That's correct, Mr. Smoke."

"I'm here to countermand that order, on Mr. Grimaldi's personal authority You *will* raise the barrier for the VW and let me follow. You'll phone your buddy on the mainland checkpoint now and tell him not to let anything through until he sees my car. When Mr. Napier gets here, about fifteen minutes from now, you will tell him Alberto Grimaldi says, 'Go back to bed.' Understand, Richter?"

"Understood, Mr. Smoke."

"You got married this spring, if memory serves?"

"You have an excellent memory, sir."

"I do. Hoping to start a family?"

"My wife's four months pregnant, Mr. Smoke."

"A piece of advice, Richter, on how to succeed in the security business. Would you like to hear this piece of advice, son?"

"I would, sir."

"The dumbest dog can sit and watch. What takes brains is knowing when to look away Am I making sense to you, Richter?"

"You're making absolute sense, Mr. Smoke."

"Then your young family's future is secure."

Smoke reverses his car alongside the guardhouse and slumps low. Sixty seconds later, a choking VW swerves around the headland. Luisa halts, rolls down her window, Richter appears, and Smoke catches the words "family emergency." Richter tells her to have a safe trip, and the barrier rises.

Bill Smoke puts his car into first, second. The sonic texture of the road surface changes as the Chevy reaches the bridge. Third gear, fourth, pedal down. The clapped-out Beetle's taillights zoom up, fifty yards, thirty yards, ten … Smoke hasn't switched his lights on. He swerves into the empty oncoming lane, shifts into fifth gear, and draws alongside. Smoke smiles. *She thinks I'm Joe Napier*. He yanks the wheel sharply, and metal screams as the Beetle is sandwiched between his car and the bridge railing until the railing unzips from its concrete and the Beetle lurches out into space.

Smoke slams the brakes. He gets out into the cool air and smells hot rubber. Back a ways, sixty seventy feet down, a VWs front bumper vanishes into the hollow sea. *If her back didn't snap, she'll have drowned in three minutes*. Bill Smoke inspects the damage to his car's bodywork and feels deflation. *Anonymous, faceless homicides,* he decides, *lack the thrill of human contact*.

The American sun, cranked up to full volume, proclaims a new dawn.

THE GHASTLY ORDEAL OF TIMOTHY CAVENDISH

One bright dusk, four, five, no, my God, *six* summers ago, I strolled along a Greenwich avenue of mature chestnuts and mock oranges in a state of grace. Those Regency residences number among London's costliest properties, but should you ever inherit one, dear Reader, sell it, don't live in it. Houses like these secrete some dark sorcery that transforms their owners into fruitcakes. One such victim, an ex-chief of Rhodesian police, had, on the evening in question, written me a check as rotund as himself to edit and print his autobiography My state of grace was thanks in part to this check, and in part to a 1983 Chablis from the Duruzoi vineyard, a magic potion that dissolves our myriad tragedies into mere misunderstandings.

A trio of teenettes, dressed like Prostitute Barbie, approached, drift-netting the width of the pavement. I stepped into the road to avoid collision. But as we drew level they tore wrappers off their lurid ice lollies and just dropped them. My sense of well-being was utterly V-2'd. I mean, we were level with a bin! Tim Cavendish the Disgusted Citizen exclaimed to the offenders: "You know, you should pick those up."

A snorted "What*chyoo* gonna do 'bou' it?" glanced off my back.

Ruddy she-apes. "I have no intention of *doing* anything about it," I remarked, over my shoulder, "I merely said that you—"

My knees buckled and the pavement cracked my cheek, shaking loose an early memory of a tricycle accident before pain erased everything but pain. A sharp knee squashed my face into leaf mold. I tasted blood. My sixtysomething wrist was winched back through ninety degrees of agony and my Ingersoll Solar was unclasped. I recall a pick 'n' mix of obscenities ancient and modern, but before my muggers could filch my wallet, the chimes of an ice-cream van playing "The Girl from Ipanema" scattered my assailants, like vam-piresses the minute before dawn.

"And you didn't report them? You dolt!" Madame X sprinkled synthetic sugar over her breakfast bran the next morning. "Phone the police for Christ's sake. What are you waiting for? The trail'll go cold." Alas, I had already amplified the truth and told her my muggers were five louts with swastikas shaved onto their skulls. How could I now file a report saying three

prepubescent lollipop girls had bested me so effortlessly? The boys in blue would have choked on their Penguin biscuits. No, my assault was not added to our nation's wishfully fulfilled crime statistics. Had my purloined Ingersoll not been a love present from a sunnier era of our now-Arctic marriage, I would have kept mum about the entire incident.

Where was I?

Odd how the wrong stories pop into one's head at my age.

It's not odd, no, it's ruddy scary I meant to begin this narrative with Dermot Hoggins. That's the problem with inking one's memoirs in longhand. You can't go changing what you've already set down, not without botching things up even more.

Look, I was Dermot "Duster" Hoggins's *editor,* not his shrink or his ruddy astrologer, so how *could* I have known what lay in store for Sir Felix Finch on that infamous night? Sir Felix Finch, Minister of Culture and El Supremo at the *Trafalgar Review of Books,* how he blazed across the media sky, how visible he remains to the naked eye even now, twelve months later. Tabloidoids read all about it across the front page; broadsheeters spilt their granola when Radio 4 reported who had fallen and how. That aviary of vultures and tits, "the columnists," eulogized the Lost King of Arts in tribute after twittering tribute.

I, by contrast, have maintained a dignified counsel until now. I should warn the busy reader, however, that the after-dinner mint of Felix Finch is merely the aperitif of my own peripatetic tribulations. The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish, if you will. Now *that* is a snappy title.

'Twas the Night of the Lemon Prize Awards, held in Jake's Starlight Bar, grandly reopened atop a Bayswater edifice with a rooftop garden thrown in for good measure. The whole ruddy publishing food chain had taken to the air and roosted at Jake's. The haunted writers, the celebrity chefs, the suits, the goateed buyers, the malnourished booksellers, packs of hacks and photographers who take "Drop dead!" to mean "Why, I'd love to!" Let me scotch that insidious little rumor implying Dermot's invitation was *my* doing, that, oh, yes, Timothy Cavendish knew his author was lusting for a high-profile revenge, QED, the entire tragedy was a publicity stunt. Tosh dreamt up by jealous rivals! No one ever owned up to sending Dermot Hoggins's invitation, and she is hardly likely to step forward now.

Anyway, the winner was announced, and we all know who got the fifty-K prize money I got sloshed. Guy the Guy introduced me to a cocktail called "Ground Control to Major Tom." Time's Arrow became Time's Boomerang, and I lost count of all my majors. A jazz sextet kicked off a rumba. I went onto the balcony for a breather and surveyed the hubbub from without. Literary London at play put me in mind of Gibbon on the Age of the Antonines. "A cloud of critics, of compilers, of commentators, darkened the face of learning, and the decline of genius was soon followed by the corruption of taste."

Dermot found me; bad news inexorably does. Let me reiterate, bumping into Pope Pius XIII would have surprised me less. In fact, His Infallibility would have blended in better—my malcontent author wore a banana suit over a chocolate shirt and a Ribena tie. I hardly need remind the curious reader that *Knuckle Sandwich* was yet to take the book world by storm. It was yet to enter a bookshop, in fact, except the sage John Sandoe's of Chelsea, and those hapless newsagents, once Jewish, then Sikh, now Eritrean, located in the Hoggins Bros.' East End parish. Indeed, it was matters of publicity and distribution that Dermot wished to discuss on the roof garden.

I explained to him for the hundredth time how an author-partnership setup like Cavendish Publishing simply cannot fritter away money on fancy catalogs and team-building go-karting weekends for sales forces. I explained, yet again, that my authors derived fulfillment from presenting their handsomely bound volumes to friends, to family, to posterity I explained, yet

again, that the gangster-chic market was saturated; and that even *Moby-Dick* bombed in Melville's lifetime, though I did not deploy that particular verb. "It *is* a truly fabulous memoir," I assured him. "Give it time."

Dermot, drunk, doleful, and deaf, looked over the railings. "All them chimneys. Long way down."

The menace, I trusted, was imaginary. "Quite."

"Mum took me to *Mary Poppins* when I was a nipper. Chimney sweeps dancing on rooftops. She watched it on video, too. Over and over. In her nursing home."

"I remember when it came out. That dates me."

"Here." Dermot frowned and pointed into the bar through the French windows. "Who's that?"

"Who's who?"

"Him in the bow tie chatting up the tiara in the bin liner."

"The presenter fellow, Felix … oh, Felix whatizzit?"

"Felix f*****g Finch! That *c**** who *shat* on my book in his poncy f*****g mag?"

"It wasn't your best review, but—"

"It was my only f*****g review!"

"It really didn't read so badly—"

"Yeah? 'None-hit wonders like Mr. Hoggins are the roadkills of modern letters.' Notice how people insert the 'Mr.' before sinking the blade in? 'Mr. Hoggins should apologize to the trees felled for his bloated "autobio-novel." Four hundred vainglorious pages expire in an ending flat and inane quite beyond belief "

"Steady now, Dermot, nobody actually reads the *Trafalgar."*

" 'Scuse!" My author collared a waiter. "Heard of the *Trafalgar Review of Books?"*

"Why sure," the East European waiter replied. "My entire faculty swears by the *TRB,* they've got the smartest reviewers."

Dermot flung his glass over the railing.

"Come now, what's a reviewer?" I reasoned. "One who reads quickly, arrogantly, but never wisely …"

The jazz sextet finished their number, and Dermot left my sentence dangling. I was drunk enough to justify a taxi and was about to leave when a Cockney town crier soundalike silenced the entire gathering: "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury! Your attention, please!"

Saints preserve us, Dermot was clanging a couple of trays together. "We have an additional award tonight, fellow book fairies!" he bellowed. Ignoring arch chuckles and "Oooooo!"s, he produced an envelope from his jacket pocket, slit it open, and pretended to read: "Award for Most Eminent Literary Critic." His audience looked on, cockatooed, booed, or turned away in embarrassment. "Competition was fierce, but the panel was unanimous in choosing His Imperial Majesty of the *Trafalgar Review of Books,* Mr.—beg pudding, *Sir*—Felix Finch O, B, and E, come—on—darn!"

Stirrers crowed. "Br*a*vo, Felix! Brav*o*!" Finch wouldn't have been a critic if he didn't love unearned attention. Doubtless he was already composing copy in his head for his *Sunday Times* column, "A Finch About Town." For his part, Dermot was all sincerity and smiles.

"What might my prize be, I wonder?" Finch smirked as the applause subsided. "A signed copy of an unpulped *Knuckle Sandwich?* Can't be many of those left!" Finch's coterie chorused hooty laughter, spurring on their commissar. "Or do I win a free flight to a South American country with leaky extradition treaties?"

"Yeah, lovie"—Dermot winked—"a free flight is *exactly* what you won."

My author grabbed Finch's lapels, rolled backwards, sank his feet into Finch's girth, and judo-propelled the shorter-than-generally-realized media personality high into the night air! High above the pansies lining the balcony railing.

Finch's shriek—his life—ended in crumpled metal, twelve floors down.
Someone's drink poured onto the carpet.
Dermot "Duster" Hoggins brushed his lapels, leaned over the balcony, and yelled: *"So who's expired in an ending flat and inane quite beyond belief now?"*
The dumbstruck crowd parted as the murderer made his way to the nibblies table. Several witnesses later recalled a dark halo. He selected a Belgian cracker adorned with Biscay anchovies and parsley drizzled with sesame oil.
The crowd's senses flooded back. Gagging noises, oh-my-Gods, and a stampede for the stairs. The most frightful hullabaloo! My thoughts? Honestly? Horror. Assuredly. Shock? You bet. Disbelief? Naturally Fear? Not really.
I will not deny a nascent sense of a silver lining to this tragic turn. My Haymarket office suite housed ninety-five unsold shrink-wraps of Dermot Hoggins's *Knuckle Sandwich,* impassioned memoir of Britain's soon to be most famous murderer. Frank Sprat—my stalwart printer in Sevenoaks, to whom I owed so much money I had the poor man over a barrel—still had the plates and was ready to roll at a moment's notice.
Hardcovers, ladies and gentlemen.
Fourteen pounds ninety-nine pence a shot.

A taste of honey!

As an experienced editor, I disapprove of flashbacks, foreshadow-ings, and tricksy devices; they belong in the 1980s with MA.s in postmodernism and chaos theory I make no apology, however, for (re)starting my own narrative with my version of that shocking affair. You see, it paved my first good intention on the road to Hull, or rather Hull's hinterland, where my ghastly ordeal is fated to unfold. My fortune took the glorious turn I had foreseen after Felix Finch's Final Fling. On the wings of sweet, free publicity, my *Knuckle Sandwich* turkey soared up the bestseller charts, where it roosted until poor Dermot was sentenced to fifteen of the best in Wormwood Scrubs. The trial made the *Nine O'Clock News* at every turn. In death Sir Felix changed from a smug-scented pomposity with a Stalinist grip on Arts Council money into, oh, Britain's best-loved arts guru since the last one.
On the steps of the Old Bailey, his widow told reporters fifteen years was "disgustingly lenient," and the very next day a "Duster Hoggins, Rot in Hell!" campaign was launched. Dermot's family counterattacked on chat shows, Finch's offending review was pored over, BBC2 commissioned a special documentary in which the lesbian who interviewed me edited my witticisms wholly out of context. Who cared? The money pot bubbled away—no, it boiled over and set the entire ruddy kitchen alight. Cavendish Publishing— Mrs. Latham and I, that is —didn't know what had hit us. We had to take on two of her nieces (part-time, of course, I wasn't getting clobbered for National Insurance). The original *Knuckle Sandwich* shrink-wraps vanished within thirty-six hours, and Frank Sprat was reprinting on a near-monthly basis. Nothing in my four decades in the publishing game had geared us for such success. Running costs had always been recouped from author donations—not from actual ruddy sales! It seemed almost unethical. Yet here I was with a bestseller of one-in-a-decade proportions on my lists. People ask me, "Tim, how do you account for its runaway success?"
Knuckle Sandwich was actually a well-written, gutsy fictional memoir. Culture vultures discussed its sociopolitical subtexts first on late-night shows, then on breakfast TV Neo-Nazis bought it for its generous lashings of violence. Worcestershire housewives bought it because it was a damn fine read. Homosexuals bought it out of tribal loyalty It shifted ninety thousand, yes, *ninety thousand* copies in four months, and yes, I am *still* talking hardcover. The feature film should be in production as I write. At the Frankfurt Book love-in I was feted by people

who until then had never so much as paused to scrape me off their shoes. That odious label "Vanity Publisher" became "Creative Financier." Translation rights fell like territories in the final round of Risk. The American publishers, glory glory Hallelujah, they *loved* the Limey-Aristo-Gets- Comeuppance-from-Downtrodden-Gaelic-Son hook, and a transatlantic auction skyrocketed the advance to giddy heights. I, yes, I, had exclusive rights to this platinum goose with a bad case of the trots! Money entered my cavernously empty accounts like the North Sea through a Dutch dike. My "personal banking consultant," a spiv named Elliot McCluskie, sent me a Christmas card photo of his Midwich Cuckoo offspring. The primates on the Groucho Club door greeted me with a "Pleasant evening, Mr. Cavendish," instead of an "Oy you got to be signed in by a member!" When I announced that I would be handling the paperback release myself, the Sundays' book pages ran pieces depicting Cavendish Publishing as a dynamic, white-hot player in a cloud of decrepit gas giants. I even made the *FT*

Was it any wonder Mrs. Latham and I were overstretched—just a smidge—on the

bookkeeping front?

Success intoxicates rookies in the blink of an eye. I got business cards printed up: Cavendish-Redux, Publishers of Cutting-Edge Fiction. Well, I thought, why *not* sell publications instead of publication? Why *not* become the serious publisher that the world lauded me as?

Alackaday! Those dinky little cards were the red flag waved at the Bull of Fate. At the first rumor that Tim Cavendish was flush, my saber-toothed meerkat creditors bounded into my office. As ever, I left the gnostic algebra of what to pay whom and when to my priceless Mrs. Latham. So it was, I was mentally *and* financially underprepared when my midnight callers visited, nearly a year after the Felix Finch Night. I confess that since Madame X left me (my cuckold was a dentist, I shall reveal the truth no matter how painful) Housekeeping Anarchy had reigned o'er my Putney domicile (oh, very well, the bastard was a German), so my porcelain throne has long been my de facto office seat. A decent Cognac sits under the ball-gowned lavatory-roll cover, and I leave the door open so I can hear the kitchen radio.

The night in question, I had put aside my perpetual lavatory read, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* because of all the manuscripts (inedible green tomatoes) submitted to Cavendish-Redux, my new stable of champions. I suppose it was about eleven o'clock when I heard my front door being interfered with. Skinhead munchkins mug-or-treating?

Cherry knockers? The wind?

Next thing I knew, the door flew in off its ruddy hinges! I was thinking al- Qaeda, I was thinking ball lightning, but no. Down the hallway tramped what seemed like an entire rugby team, though my intruders numbered only three. (You'll notice, I am always attacked in threes.)

"Timothy," pronounced the gargoyliest, "Cavendish, I presume. Caught with your cacks down."

"My business hours are eleven to two, gentlemen," Bogart would have said, "with a three-hour break for lunch. Kindly leave." All I could do was blurt, "Oy! My door! My ruddy door!"

Thug Two lit a cigarette. "We visited Dermot today. He's a bit frustrated. Who wouldn't be?"

The pieces fell into place. I fell into pieces. "Dermot's brothers!" (I'd read all about them in Dermot's book. Eddie, Mozza, Jarvis.)

Hot ash burnt my thigh, and I lost track of which face uttered what. It was a Francis Bacon triptych come to life. "*Knuckle Sandwich* is doing nicely, by the looks of things."

"Piles of it in the airport bookshops."

"You must at least of *suspected* we'd come calling."

"A man of your business acumen."

The London Irish unnerve me at the best of times. "Boys, boys. Dermot signed a copyright-

transfer contract. Look, look, it's industry standard, I have a copy in my briefcase here …" I did indeed have the document to hand. "Clause eighteen, about copyright … means *Knuckle Sandwich,* legally, is … er …" It wasn't easy to tell them this with my briefs around my ankles. "Er, legally the property of Cavendish Publishing."

Jarvis Hoggins scanned the contract for a moment but tore it up when it proved longer than his concentration span. "Dermot signed this f*****g pants when his book was just a f*****g hobby"

"A present to our sick old mam, God rest her soul."

"A souvenir of Dad's heyday."

"Dermot never signed no f*****g contract for the event of the f*****g season."

"We paid your printer, Mr. Sprat, a little visit. He went through the economics for us."

Contract confetti showered. Mozza was close enough for me to smell his dinner. "Quite a hill of Hoggins Bros.' cash you've raked in, it seems."

"I'm sure we can agree on a, um, um, funds flowchart, which will—"

Eddie cut in: "Let's make it three."

I feigned a wince. "Three thousand pounds? Boys, I don't think—"

"Don't be a silly billy." Mozza pinched my cheek. "Three—o'— clock. Tomorrow afternoon. Your office."

I had no choice. "Perhaps we might … er … moot a provisional sum to conclude this meeting, as a basis for … ongoing negotiation."

"Okeydokey What sum did we *moot* earlier, Mozza?"

"Fifty K sounded reasonable."

My cry of pain was unfeigned. "Fifty thousand *pounds?"*

"For starters."

My intestines bubbled, toiled and troubled. "Do you really think I keep that kind of money lying around in shoe boxes?" I pitched my voice for Dirty Harry, but it was more Lisping Baggins.

"I hope you keep it lying around somewhere, Grandpops."

"Cash."

"No bollocks. No checks."

"No promises. No deferments."

"Old-fashioned money A shoe box will do fine."

"Gentlemen, I'm happy to pay a negotiated consideration, but the law—"

Jarvis whistled through his teeth. "Will the law help a man of your years bounce back from multiple spinal fractures, Timothy?"

Eddie: "Men of your age don't bounce. They splat."

I fought with all my might, but my sphincter was no longer my own and a cannonade fired off. Amusement or condescension I could have borne, but my tormentors' pity signified my abject defeat. The toilet chain was pulled.

"Three o'clock." Cavendish-Redux went down the pan. Out trooped the thugs, over my prostrate door. Eddie turned for a last word. "Dermot did a nice little paragraph in his book. On loan defaulters."

I refer the curious reader to page 244 *of Knuckle Sandwich,* available from your local

bookshop. Not on a full stomach.

Outside my Haymarket office suite taxis inched and sprinted. Inside my inner sanctum, Mrs. Latham's Nefertiti earrings (a gift from me to mark her tenth year with Cavendish Publishing, I found them in a British Museum Gift Shop bargain bin) jingled as she shook her head, no, no,

no. "And I am telling *you,* Mr. Cavendish, that I cannot find you fifty thousand pounds by three o'clock this afternoon. I cannot find you five thousand pounds. Every *Knuckle Sandwich* penny has already been Hoovered up by long-standing debts."

"Doesn't anybody owe *us* money?"

"I always keep on top of the invoicing, Mr. Cavendish, do I not?"

Desperation makes me wheedle. "This is the age of ready credit!"

"This is the age of credit *limits,* Mr. Cavendish."

I retired to my office, poured myself a whiskey, and slooshed down my dicky-ticker pills before tracing Captain Cook's last voyage on my antique globe. Mrs. Latham brought in the mail and left without a word. Bills, junk, moral muggings from charity fundraisers, and a package addressed "FAO The Visionary Editor of *Knuckle Sandwich,"* containing a MS titled *Half-Lives*—lousy name for a work of fiction—and subtitled *The First Luisa Rey Mystery*. Lousier and lousier. Its lady author, one dubiously named Hilary V Hush, began her covering letter with the following: "When I was nine my mom took me to Lourdes to pray for my bed-wetting to be cured. Imagine my surprise when not Saint Bernadette but Alain-Fournier appeared in a vision that night."

Nutcase ahoy. I threw the letter away into my "Urgent Business" tray and switched on my spanking new fat-gigabyte computer for a game of Minesweeper. After getting blown up twice I telephoned Sotheby's to offer Charles Dickens's own, original, authentic writing desk for auction with a reserve price of sixty thousand. A charming evaluator named Kirpal Singh commiserated that the novelist's desk was already accounted for by the Dickens House museum and hoped I'd not been fleeced too painfully I confess, I do lose track of my little elaborations. Next I called Elliot McCluskie and asked after his delightful kiddies. "Fine, thank you." He asked after my delightful business. I asked for a loan of eighty thousand pounds. He began with a thoughtful "Right …" I lowered my ceiling to sixty Elliot pointed out that my performance-linked credit stream still had a twelve-month flow horizon before resizing could be feasibly optioned. Oh, I miss the days when they'd laugh like a hyena, tell you to go to hell, and hang up. I traced Magellan's voyage across my globe and longed for a century when a fresh beginning was no further than the next clipper out of Dept-ford. My pride already in tatters, I gave Madame X a bell. She was having her A.M. soak. I explained the gravity of my situation. She laughed like a hyena, told me to go to hell, and hung up. I spun my globe. I spun my globe.

Mrs. Latham eyeballed me like a hawk watching a bunny as I stepped outside. "No, not a loan shark, Mr. Cavendish. It just isn't worth it."

"Never fear, Mrs. Latham, I'm just going to pay a call on the one man in this world who believes in me, fair weather or foul." In the lift I reminded my reflection, "Blood is thicker than water," before spiking my palm on the spoke of my telescopic umbrella.

"Oh, Satan's gonads, not you. Look, just get lost and leave us in peace." My brother glared across his swimming pool as I stepped down his patio. Denholme's never swum in his pool, as far as I know, but he does all the chlorinating and whatnot every week just the same, even in blustery drizzle. He trawled for leaves with a big net on a pole. "I'm not lending you a ruddy farthing until you pay back the last lot. Why must *I* forever be giving *you* handouts? No. Don't answer." Denholme scooped a fistful of soggy leaves from the net. "Just get back in your taxi and bugger off. I'll only ask you nicely once."

"How's Georgette?" I brushed aphids off his shriveled rose petals.

"Georgette's going bonkers surely and steadily, not that you ever evince an ounce of genuine interest when you don't want money."

I watched a worm return to soil and wished I was it. "Denny, I've had a minor run-in with the wrong sort. If I can't get my hands on sixty thousand pounds, I'm going to take an awful beating."
"Get them to video it for us."
"I'm not joking, Denholme."
"Nor am I! So, you're shoddy at being duplicitous. What of it? Why is this my problem?"
"We're brothers! Don't you have a conscience?"
"I sat on the board of a merchant bank for thirty years."
An amputated sycamore tree shed once green foliage like desperate men shed once steadfast resolutions. "Help, Denny. Please. Thirty grand would be a start."
I had pushed too hard. "Damn it to hell, Tim, my bank *crashed!* We were bled dry by those bloodsuckers at Lloyd's! The days when I had that kind of spondulics at my beck and call are gone, gone, gone! Our house is mortgaged, twice over! I'm the mighty fallen, you're the minuscule fallen. Anyway, you've got this ruddy book flying out of every bookshop in the known world!" My face said what I had no words for. "Oh, Christ, you idiot. What's the repayment schedule?" I looked at my watch. "Three o'clock this afternoon." "Forget it." Denholme put down his net. "File for bankruptcy. Reynard'll do the papers for you, he's a good man. A hard bullet to bite, I should know, but it'll get your creditors off your back. The law is clear—"
"Law? The only experience *my* creditors have of the law is squatting over a can in an overcrowded cell." "Then go to ground."
"These people are very, *very* well connected with the ground." "Not beyond the M25 they aren't, I bet. Stay with friends." Friends? I crossed off those to whom I owed money, the dead, the disappeared-down-time's-rabbit-hole, and I was left with …
Denholme made his final offer. "I can't lend you money. I don't have any. But I'm owed a favor or two by a comfortable place where you could possibly lie low for a while."

Temple of the Rat King. Ark of the Soot God. Sphincter of Hades. Yes, King's Cross Station, where, according to *Knuckle Sandwich,* a blow job costs only five quid—any of the furthest-left three cubicles in the men's lavvy downstairs, twenty-four hours a day. I called Mrs. Latham to explain I would be in Prague for a three-week meeting with Václav Havel, a lie whose consequences stuck with me like herpes. Mrs. Latham wished me bon voyage. She could handle the Hogginses. Mrs. Latham could handle the Ten Plagues of Egypt. I don't deserve her, I know it. I often wonder why she's stayed at Cavendish Publishing. It isn't for what I pay her.
I navigated the array of ticket types on the ticket machine: Day Return with Railcard Off Peak, Cheap Day Single Without Railcard on Peak, and on, and on, but which, oh, which do I need? A menacing finger tapped my shoulder and I jumped a mile—it was only a little old lady advising me that returns are cheaper than singles. I assumed she was doolally but, stone the ruddy crows, 'twas so. I slid in a banknote with our monarch's head up, then down, then front first, then back first, but each time the machine spat it out.
So I joined the queue for a human ticket seller. Thirty-one people were ahead of me, yes, I counted every one. The ticket sellers drifted in and out from their counters much as the fancy took them. A looped advertisement on a screen urged me to invest in a stair-lift. Finally, *finally,* my turn was up: "Hello, I need a ticket to Hull."
The ticket woman toyed with her chunky ethnic rings. "Leaving when?"
"As soon as possible."
"As in 'today'?"

" 'Today usually means 'as soon as possible,' yes."
"I ain't sellin' you a ticket for today. That's them winders over there. This winder is advance tickets only."
"But the red flashing sign told me to come to your counter."
"Couldn't have done. Move along, now. You're holding up the queue."
"No, that sign ruddy well *did* send me to this counter! I've been queuing for twenty minutes!"
She looked interested for the first time. "You want me to change the rules for your benefit?"
Anger sparked in Timothy Cavendish like forks in microwaves. "I want you to evolve problem-solving intelligence and sell me a ticket to Hull!"
"I ain't standing for being addressed in that tone."
"*I*'m the ruddy customer! *I* won't be addressed like that! Get me your ruddy supervisor!"
"I *am* my supervisor."
Snarling an oath from an Icelandic saga, I reclaimed my place at the head of the queue.
"Oy!" yelled a punk rocker, with studs in his cranium. "There's a fackin' queue!"
Never apologize, advises Lloyd George. Say it again, only this time, ruder. "I know there's a 'fackin' queue'! I already queued in it once and I am *not* going to queue again just because Nina Simone over there won't sell me a ruddy ticket!"
A colored yeti in a clip-on uniform swooped. "Wassa bovver?"
"This old man here reckons his colostomy bag entitles him to jump the queue," said the skinhead, *"and* make racist slurs about the lady of Afro-Caribbean extraction in the advance-travel window."
I couldn't believe I was hearing this.
"Look, matey"—the yeti addressed me with condescension reserved for the handicapped or elderly—"we got queues in this country to keep things fair, see, and if you don't like it you should go back to where you come from, getit?"
"Do I *look* like a ruddy Egyptian? Do I? I *know* there's a queue! How? Because I already queued in this queue, so—"
"This gentleman claims you ain't."
"Him? Will he still be a 'gentleman' when he daubs Asylum Scrounger' on your housing-association flat?"
His eyeballs swelled, they really did. "The Transport Police can boot you off the premises, or you can join this queue like a member of a civilized society Whichever is fine by me. Jumping queues is *not* fine by me."
"But if I queue all over again I'll miss my connections!"
"Tough," he enunciated, "titty!"
I appealed to the people behind that Sid Rotten look-alike. Maybe they had seen me in the queue, maybe they hadn't, but nobody met my eye. England has gone to the dogs, oh, the dogs, the ruddy dogs.

Over an hour later London shunted itself southward, taking the Curse of the Brothers Hoggins with it. Commuters, these hapless souls who enter a lottery of death twice daily on Britain's decrepit railways, packed the dirty train. Airplanes circled in holding patterns over Heathrow, densely as gnats over a summer puddle. Too much matter in this ruddy city
Still. I felt the exhilaration of a journey begun, and I let my guard drop. A volume I once published, *True Recollections of a Northern Territories Magistrate,* claims that shark victims experience an anesthetic vision of floating away, all danger gone, into the Pacific blue, at the very moment they are being minced in that funnel of teeth. I, Timothy Cavendish, was that swimmer, watching London roll away, yes, you, you sly, toupeed quizmaster of a city you and

your tenements of Somalians; viaducts of Kingdom Brunel; malls of casualized labor; strata of soot-blitzed bricks and muddy bones of Doctors Dee, Crippen et al.; hot glass office buildings where the blooms of youth harden into aged cacti like my penny-pinching brother.

Essex raised its ugly head. When I was a scholarship boy at the local grammar, son of a city-hall toiler on the make, this county was synonymous with liberty success, and Cambridge. Now look at it. Shopping malls and housing estates pursue their creeping invasion of our ancient land. A North Sea wind snatched frilly clouds in its teeth and scarpered off to the Midlands. The countryside proper began at last. My mother had a cousin out here, her family had a big house, I think they moved to Winnipeg for a better life. There! There, in the shadow of that DIY warehouse, once stood a row of walnut trees where me and Pip Oakes—a childhood chum who died aged thirteen under the wheels of an oil tanker—varnished a canoe one summer and sailed it along the Say Sticklebacks in jars. There, right there, around that bend we lit a fire and cooked beans and potatoes wrapped in silver foil! Come back, oh, come back! Is one glimpse all I get? Hedgeless, featureless fields. Essex *is* Winnipeg, now. Stubble was burnt, and the air tasted of crisp bacon sarnies. My thoughts flew off with other fairies, and we were past Saffron Walden when the train juddered to a halt. "Um …," said the intercom. "John, is this on? John, what button do I press?" Cough. "SouthNet Trains regrets that this service will make an unscheduled stop at the next station due to … a missing driver. This unscheduled stop will continue for the duration that it takes to locate an appropriate driver. SouthNet Trains assures you we are striving hard"—I clearly discerned a background snigger!—"to restore our normal excellent standard of service." Rail rage chain-reactioned down the compartments, though in our age crimes are not committed by criminals conveniently at hand but by executive pens far beyond the mob's reach, back in London's postmodern HQs of glass and steel. Half the mob owns shares in what it would pound to atoms, anyway.

So there we sat. I wished I had brought something to read. At least I had a seat, and I wouldn't have given it up for Helen Keller. The evening was lemon blue. Trackside shadows grew monolithic. Commuters sent calls to families on mobile phones. I wondered how that dodgy Australian magistrate knew what flashed through the minds of the shark-eaten. Lucky express trains with nonmiss-ing drivers shot past. I needed the loo, but it didn't bear imagining. I opened my briefcase for a bag of Werner's toffees but came up with *Half-Lives—The First Luisa Rey Mystery*. I leafed through its first few pages. It would be a better book if Hilary V Hush weren't so artsily-fartsily Clever. She had written it in neat little chap-teroids, doubtless with one eye on the Hollywood screenplay. Static squealed in the speakers. "This is a passenger announcement. SouthNet Trains regrets that as a suitable driver for this train cannot be located we will proceed to Little Chesterford station, where a complimentary coach will transport passengers on to Cambridge. Those able to are recommended to make alternative travel arrangements, as the coach will not reach Little Chesterford station [how that name chimed in my memory!] for … an unknown duration. Further details can be found on our website." The train crawled a mile of twilight. Bats and wind-borne rubbish overtook us. Who was driving now if there wasn't a driver?

Stop, shudder, doors open. The abler-bodied streamed off the train, over the footbridge, leaving me and a couple of taxidermist's castoffs to limp in their wake at quarter speed. I heaved myself up the steps and paused for breath. There I was. Standing on the footbridge of Little Chesterford station. Ye gods, of all the rural stations for a marooning. The bridle path to Ursula's old house still skirted the cornfield. Not much else did I recognize. The Sacred Barn of the Longest Snog was now Essex's Premier Fitness Club. Ursula had met me in her froggy Citroën that night during reading week in our first term, right … on this triangle of gravel, here. How bohemian, Young Tim had thought, to be met by a woman in a car. I was Tutankhamen in my royal barge, rowed by Nubian slaves to the Temple of Sacrifice. Ursula drove me the

few hundred yards to Dockery House, commissioned in Art Nouveau times by a Scandiwegian consul. We had the place to ourselves, while Mater and Pater were in Greece holidaying with Lawrence Durrell, if memory serves. ("Memory Serves." Duplicitous couplet.) Four decades later the beams of headlights from executive cars in the station car park lit up a freak plague of daddy longlegs, and one fugitive publishing gentleman in a flapping raincoat striding around a field now lying fallow for EU subsidies. You would think a place the size of England could easily hold all the happenings in one humble lifetime without much overlap—I mean, it's not ruddy Luxembourg we live in—but no, we cross, crisscross, and recross our old tracks like figure skaters. Dockery House was still standing, isolated from its neighbors by a privet fence. How opulent the building had felt after my own parents' bland box of suburbia—*One day,* I promised, *I'm going to live in a house like this*. Another promise I've broken; at least that one was only to myself.

I skirted the edge of the property down an access road to a building site. A sign read: HAZLE CLOSE—HIGHLY PRIZED EXECUTIVE HOMES IN THE HEART OF ENGLAND. Upstairs at Dockery lights were on. I imagined a childless couple listening to a wireless. The old stained-glass door had been replaced by something more burglarproof That reading week I'd entered Dockery ready to peel off my shameful virginity but I'd been so in awe of my Divine Cleopatra, so nervous, so eyeballed up on her father's whiskey, so floppy with green sap that, well, I'd rather draw a veil over the embarrassment of that night, even at forty years' remove. Very well, forty-seven years' remove. That same white-leafed oak had scratted at Ursula's window as I attempted to perform, long after I could decently pretend I was still warming up. Ursula had a gramophone record of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto in her bedroom, that room there, where the electric candle glows in the window.

To this day I cannot hear Rachmaninoff without flinching.

The odds of Ursula still living at Dockery House were zilch, I knew. Last I heard she was running a PR office in Los Angeles. Nonetheless, I squeezed myself through the evergreen hedge and pressed my nose up against the unlit, uncurtained dining room window, trying to peer in. That autumn night long ago Ursula had served a blob of grilled cheese on a slice of ham on a breast of chicken. Right there—right here. I could still taste it. I can still taste it as I write these words.

Flash!

The room was lit electric marigold, and in waltzed—backwards, luckily for me—a little witch with red corkscrew curls. "Mummy!" I half-heard, half-lip-read through the glass. "Mummy!" and in came Mummy, with the same corkscrew curls. This being proof enough for me that Ursula's family had long vacated the house, I backtracked into the shrubbery—but I turned once more and resumed my spying because … well, because, *ahem, je suis un homme solitaire*. Mummy was repairing a broken broomstick while the girl sat on the table swinging her legs. An adult werewolf came in and removed his mask, and oddly, though not so oddly I suppose, I recognized him—that current-affairs TV presenter, one of Felix Finch's tribe. Jeremy Someone, Heathcliff eyebrows, terrier manners, you know the chap. He took some insulation tape from the Welsh dresser drawer and muscled in on the broomstick repair job. Then Grandma entered this domestic frieze, and damn me once, damn me twice, damn me always make it nice, 'twas Ursula. The Ursula. My Ursula.

Behold that spry, elderly lady! In my memory she hadn't aged a day—what makeup artist had savaged her dewy youth? (The same one who savaged yours, Timbo.) She spoke, and her daughter and granddaughter giggled, yes, giggled, and I giggled too … What? What did she say? Tell me the joke! She stuffed a red stocking with newspaper balls. A devil's tail. She attached it to her posterior with a safety pin, and a memory from a university Halloween Ball cracked on the hard rim of my heart and the yolk dribbled out—shed dressed like a devilette

then, too, shed put on red face paint, wed kissed all night, just kissed, and in the morning we found a builders' café that sold dirty mugs of strong, milky tea and enough eggs to fill, to kill, the Swiss Army. Toast and hot canned tomatoes. HP Sauce. Be honest, Cavendish, was any other breakfast in your life *ever* so delectable?

So drunk was I on nostalgia, I ordered myself to leave before I did anything stupid. A nasty voice just a few feet away said this— "Don't move a muscle or I'll mackasser you and put you in a *stew!"*

Shocked? Jet-assisted Vertical Ruddy Takeoff! Luckily my would-be butcherer was not a day older than ten, and his chain saw's teeth were cardboard, but his bloodied bandages were rather effective. In a low voice, I told him so. He wrinkled his face at me. "Are you Grandma Ursula's friend?"

"Once upon a time, yes, I was."

"What have you come to the party as? Where's your costume?"

Time to leave. I edged back into the evergreen. "This *is* my costume."

He picked his nose. "A dead man digged up from the churchyard?"

"Charmed, but no. I've come as the Ghost of Christmas Past."

"But it's Halloween, not Christmas."

"No!" I slapped my forehead. "Really?"

"Yeah …"

"Then I'm ten months late! This is terrible! I'd better get back before my absence is noticed—and remarked upon!"

The boy did a cartoon kung-fu pose and waved his chain saw at me. "Not so fast, Green Goblin! You're a trespasser! I'm telling the police of you!"

War. "Tell-tale-tit, are you? Two can play at *that* game. If you tell on me, I'll tell my friend the Ghost of Christmas Future where your house is, and do you know what he'll do to you?"

The wide-eyed shitletto shook his head, shaken and stirred.

"When your family is all tucked up asleep in your snug little beds, he'll slide into your house through the crack under the door and *eat—your—puppy!"* The venom in my bile duct pumped fast. "He'll leave its curly tail under your pillow and you'll get blamed. Your little friends will all scream, 'Puppy slayer!' whenever they see you coming. You'll grow old and friendless and die, alone, miserably, on Christmas morning half a century from now. So if I were you, I wouldn't breathe a word to *anyone* about seeing me."

I pushed myself through the hedge before he could take it all in. As I was heading back to the station along the pavement, the wind carried his sob: "But I don't even *have* a puppy …"

I hid behind *Private Eye* in the health center's Wellness Café, which was doing a fine trade with us maroonees. I half-expected a furious Ursula to turn up with her grandchild and a local bobby. Private lifeboats came to rescue the stockbrokers. Old Father Timothy offers this advice to his younger readers, included for free in the price of this memoir: conduct your life in such a way that, when your train breaks down in the eve of your years, you have a warm, dry car driven by a loved one—or a hired one, it matters not—to take you home.

A venerable coach arrived three Scotches later. Venerable? Ruddy Edwardian. I had to endure chatty students all the way to Cambridge. Boyfriend worries, sadistic lecturers, demonic housemates, reality TV, strewth, I had no idea children of their age were so hyperactive. When I finally reached Cambridge station, I looked for a telephone box to tell Aurora House not to expect me until the following day, but the first two telephones were vandalized (in Cambridge, I ask you!), and only when I got to the third did I look at the address and see that Denholme had neglected to write the number. I found a hotel for commercial travelers next to a launderette. I forget its name, but I knew from its reception that the place was a crock of cat crap, and as usual my first impression was spot on. I was too ruddy whacked to shop around

for something nicer, however, and my wallet was too starved. My room had high windows with blinds I couldn't lower because I am not twelve feet tall. The khaki pellets in the bathtub were indeed mouse droppings, the shower knob came off in my hand, and the hot water was tepid. I fumigated the room with cigar smoke and lay on my bed trying to recall the bedrooms of all my lovers, in order, looking down the mucky telescope of time. Prince Rupert and the Boys failed to stir. I felt strangely unconcerned with the idea of the Hoggins Bros. plundering my flat back in Putney. Must be lean pickings compared to most of their heists, if *Knuckle Sandwich* is anything to go by. A few nice first editions, but little else of value. My television died the night George Bush II snatched the throne and I haven't dared replace it. Madame X took back her antiques and heirlooms. I ordered a triple Scotch from room service—damn me if I'd share a bar with a cabal of salesmen boasting about boobs and bonuses. When my treble whiskey finally came it was actually a stingy double, so I said so. The ferrety adolescent just shrugged. No apology, just a shrug. I asked him to lower my blind, but he took one look and huffed, "Can't reach that!" I gave him a frosty "That will be all, then," instead of a tip. He broke wind as he left, poisonously I read more of *Half-Lives* but fell asleep just after Rufus Sixsmith was found murdered. In a lucid dream I was looking after a little asylum-seeker boy who begged for a go in one of those rides in the corners of supermarkets you put fifty p into. I said, "Oh, all right," but when the child climbed out he had turned into Nancy Reagan. How could I explain that to his mother?

I woke up in darkness with a mouth like Super Glue. The Mighty Gibbon's assessment of history—"little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind"—ticker-taped by for no apparent reason. Timothy Cavendish's time on Earth, in thirteen words. I refought old arguments, then fought arguments that have never even existed. I smoked a cigar until the high windows showed streaks of a watery dawn. I shaved my jowls. A pinched Ulsterwoman downstairs served a choice of burnt or frozen toast with sachets of lipstick-colored jam and unsalted butter . I remembered Jake Balokowsky's quip about Normandy: Cornwall with something to eat.

Back at the station my woes began afresh when I tried to get a refund on yesterday's disrupted journey. The ticket-wallah, whose pimples bubbled as I watched, was as intractably dense as his counterpart in King's Cross. The corporation breeds them from the same stem cell. My blood pressure neared its record. "What do you *mean,* yesterday's ticket is now invalid? It's not my fault my ruddy train broke down!"

"Not our fault neither. SouthNet run the trains. We're Ticket-Lords, see."

"Then to whom do I complain?"

"Well, SouthNet Loco are owned by a holding company in Düs-seldorf who are owned by that mobile-phone company in Finland, so you'd be best off trying someone in Helsinki. You should thank your lucky stars it wasn't a derailment. Get a lot of those, these days."

Sometimes the fluffy bunny of incredulity zooms round the bend so rapidly that the greyhound of language is left, agog, in the starting cage. A feisty stagger was needed to reach the next train before it left—only to find it had been canceled! But, "luckily," the train before mine was so late that it still hadn't departed. All the seats were taken, and I had to squeeze into a three-inch slot. I lost my balance when the train pulled away, but a human crumple zone buffered my fall. We stayed like that, half fallen. The Diagonal People.

Cambridge outskirts are all science parks now. Ursula and I went punting below that quaint bridge, where those Biotech Space Age cuboids now sit cloning humans for shady Koreans. Oh, aging is ruddy unbearable! The I's we were yearn to breathe the world's air again, but can they ever break out from these calcified cocoons? Oh, can they hell.

Witchy trees bent before the enormous sky. Our train had made an unscheduled and unexplained stop on a blasted heath, for how long, I do not recall. My watch was stuck in the middle of last night. (I miss my Ingersoll, even today.) My fellow passengers' features melted into forms that were half familiar: an estate agent behind me, yacking on his mobile telephone, I could *swear* he was my sixth-form hockey captain; the grim woman two seats ahead, reading *A Moveable Feast,* isn't she that Inland Revenue gorgon who gave me such a grilling a few years ago?

Finally the couplings whimpered and the train limped off at a slow haul to another country station whose flaky name board read "Adlestrop." A voice with a bad cold announced:

"Centrallo Trains regrets that due to a braking-systems failure this train will make a brief stop at this—sneeze—station. Passengers are directed to alight here … and wait for a substitute train." My fellow travelers gasped, groaned, swore, shook their heads. "Centrallo Trains apologizes for any—sneeze—inconvenience this may cause, and assures you we are working hard to restore our normal excellent standard of—huge sneeze—service. Gi' us a tissue, John."

Fact: rolling stock in this country is built in Hamburg or somewhere, and when the German engineers test British-bound trains, they use imported lengths of our buggered, privatized tracks because the decently maintained European rails won't provide accurate testing conditions. Who really won the ruddy war? I should have fled the Hogginses up the Great North Road on a ruddy pogo stick.

I elbowed my way into the grubby café, bought a pie that tasted of shoe polish and a pot of tea with cork crumbs floating in it, and eavesdropped on a pair of Shetland pony breeders. Despondency makes one hanker after lives one never led. Why have you given your life to books, TC? Dull, dull, dull! The memoirs are bad enough, but all that ruddy fiction! Hero goes on a journey, stranger comes to town, somebody wants something, they get it or they don't, will is pitted against will. "Admire me, for I am a metaphor."

I groped my way to the ammonia-smelling gents', where a joker had stolen the bulb. I had just unzipped myself when a voice arose from the shadows. "Hey, mistah, got a light or sumfink?" Steadying my cardiac arrest, I fumbled for my lighter. The flame conjured a Rastafarian in Holbein embers, just a few inches away, a cigar held in his thick lips. "Fanks," whispered my black Virgil, inclining his head to bring the tip into the flame.

"You're, erm, most welcome, quite," I said.

His wide, flat nose twitched. "So, where you heading, man?"

My hand checked my wallet was still there. "Hull …" A witless fib ran wild. "To return a novel. To a librarian who works there. A very famous poet. At the university It's in my bag. It's called *Half-Lives."* The Rastafarian's cigar smelt of compost. I can never guess what they're really thinking. Not that I've ever really known any. I'm not a racialist, but I do believe the ingredients in so-called melting pots take generations to melt. "Mistah," the Rastafarian told me, "you need"—and I flinched—"some o' this." I obeyed his offer and sucked on his turd-thick cigar.

Ruddy hell! "What *is* this stuff?"

He made a noise like a didgeridoo at the root of his throat. "That don't grow in Marlboro Country" My head enlarged itself by a magnitude of many hundreds, *Alice-style,* and became a multistory car park wherein dwelt a thousand and one operatic Citroëns. "My word, you can say that again," mouthed the Man Formerly Known as Tim Cavendish.

Next thing I remember, I was on the train again, wondering who had walled up my compartment with moss-stained bricks. "We're ready for you now, Mr. Cavendish," a bald, spectacled coot told me. Nobody was there, or anywhere. Only a cleaner, making his way

down the vacant train, putting litter into a sack. I lowered myself onto the platform. The cold sank its fangs into my exposed neck and frisked me for uninsulated patches. Back in King's Cross? No, this was wintriest Gdansk. In a panic I realized I didn't have my bag and umbrella. I climbed aboard and retrieved them from the luggage rack. My muscles seemed to have atrophied in my sleep. Outside, a baggage cart passed, driven by a Modigliani. Where in hell *was* this place?

"Yurrin Hulpal," the Modigliani answered.

Arabic? My brain proposed the following: a Eurostar train had stopped at Adlestrop, I had boarded and slept all the way to Istanbul Central. Addled brain. I needed a clear sign, in English.

WELCOME TO HULL.

Praise be, my journey was nearly over. When had I last been this far north? Never, that's when. I gulped cold air to stub out a sudden urge to throw up—that's right, Tim, drink it down. The offended stomach supplies pictures of the cause of its discomfort, and the Rastafarian's cigar flashed before me. The station was painted in all blacks. I rounded a corner and found two luminous clock faces hung above the exit, but clocks in disagreement are worse than no clock at all. No watcher at the gates wanted to see my exorbitantly priced ticket, and I felt cheated. Out front a curb crawler prowled here, a window blinked there, music waxed and waned from a pub across the bypass. "Spare change?" asked, no, demanded, no, accused, a miserable dog in a blanket. His master's nose, eyebrows, and lips were so pierced with ironmongery that a powerful electromagnet would have shredded his face in a single pass. What do these people do at airport metal detectors? "Got any change?" I saw myself as he saw me, a frail old giffer in a friendless late city The dog rose, scenting vulnerability An invisible guardian took my elbow and led me to a taxi rank.

The taxi seemed to have been going round the same roundabout for a miniature eternity A howling singer on the radio strummed a song about how everything that dies someday comes back. (Heaven forfend—remember the Monkey's Paw!) The driver's head was far, far too big for his shoulders, he must have had that Elephant Man disease, but when he turned round I made out his turban. He was bemoaning his clientele. "*Always* they say, 'Bet it ain't this cold where you're from, eh?' and always I say, 'Dead wrong, mate. You've obviously never visited Manchester in February' "

"You do know the way to Aurora House, don't you?" I asked, and the Sikh said, "Look, we've arrived already" The narrow driveway ended at an imposing Edwardian residence of indeterminate size. "Sick teen-squid Zachary."

"I don't know anyone of that name."

He looked at me, puzzled, then repeated, "Sixteen—quid— exactly"

"Oh. Yes." My wallet was not in my trouser pockets, or my jacket pocket. Or my shirt pocket. Nor did it reappear in my trouser pockets. The awful truth smacked my face. "I've been ruddy robbed!"

"I resent the insinuation. My taxi has a municipal meter."

"No, you don't understand, my wallet's been stolen."

"Oh, then I understand." Good, he understands. "I understand very well!" The wrath of the subcontinent swarmed in the dark. "You're thinking, That curry muncher knows whose side the fuzz'll take."

"Nonsense!" I protested. "Look, I've got coins, change, yes, a pocketful of change … here … yes, thank God! Yes, I think I've got it …"

He counted his ducats. "Tip?"

"Take it." I had emptied all the shrapnel into his other hand and scrambled outside, straight into a ditch. From my accident-victim's-eye view I saw the taxi speed away, and I suffered a

disagreeable flashback to my Greenwich mugging. It wasn't the watch or even the bruises or the shock that had scarred me so. It was that I was a man who had once faced down and bested a quartet of Arab ragamuffins in Aden, but in the girls' eyes I was … old, merely old. Not behaving the way an old man should—invisible, silent, and scared—was, itself, sufficient provocation.

I scaled the ramp up to the imposing glass doors. The reception area glowed grail gold. I knocked, and a woman who could have been cast for the stage musical *of Florence Nightingale* smiled at me. I felt like someone had waved a magic wand and said, "Cavendish, all your troubles are over!"

Florence let me in. "Welcome to Aurora House, Mr. Cavendish!"

"Oh, thank you, thank you. Today has been too ruddy awful for words."

An angel incarnate. "The main thing is you've arrived safely now."

"Look, there is a slight fiscal embarrassment I should mention at this time. You see, on my way here—"

"All you need to worry about now is getting a good night's sleep. Everything is taken care of. Just sign here and I can show you to your room. It's a nice quiet one overlooking the garden. You'll love it."

Moist-eyed with gratitude, I followed her to my sanctuary. The hotel was modern, spotless, with very soft lighting in the sleepy corridors. I recognized aromas from my childhood but couldn't quite identify them. Up the wooden hill to Bedfordshire. My room was simple, its sheets crisp and clean, with towels ready on the heated rail. "Will you be all right from now, Mr. Cavendish?"

"Bliss, my dear."

"Sweet dreams, then." I knew they would be. I took a quick shower, slipped into my jimjams, and cleaned my teeth. My bed was firm but comfy as beaches in Tahiti. The Hoggins Horrors were east of the Horn, I was scot-free, and Denny, dearest Denholme, was footing my bill. Brother in need, brother indeed. Sirens sang in my marshmallow pillows. In the morning life would begin afresh, afresh, afresh. This time round I would do everything right.

"In the morning." Fate is fond of booby-trapping those three little words. I awoke to discover a not-so-young woman with a pageboy haircut rifling through my personal effects like a bargain hunter. "What the *ruddy hell* are you doing in my room, you pilfering warty sow?" I half-roared, half-wheezed.

The female put down my jacket without guilt. "Because you are new I will not have you eat soap powder. This time. Be warned. I do not stand for offensive language in Aurora House. Not from anyone. And I never make idle threats, Mr. Cavendish. Never."

A robber reprimanding his victim for bad language! "I'll ruddy well talk to you how I ruddy well like, you stinking ruddy thief! Make me eat soap powder? I'd like to see you try! Let's call Hotel Security! Let's call the police! You ask about offensive language, and I'll ask about breaking, entry, and theft!"

She came over to my bed and slapped me hard across the chops.

I was so shocked I just fell back onto my pillow.

"A disappointing start. I am Mrs. Noakes. You do not wish to cross me."

Was this some sort of a kinky S & M hotel? Had a madwoman broken into my room after learning my name from the hotel register?

"Smoking is discouraged here. I will have to confiscate these cigars. The lighter is far too dangerous for you to play with. And what, pray, are these?" She dangled my keys.

"Keys. What do you think they are?"

“Keys go walkies! Let’s give them to Mrs. Judd for safekeeping, shall we?”
“Let’s not give them to anyone, you crazy dragon! You *strike* me! You *rob* me! What kind of ruddy hotel hires *thieves* for chambermaids?”
The creature stuffed her booty into a little burglar’s bag. “No more valuables to be taken care of?”
“Put those items back! Now! Or I’ll have your job, I swear it!”
“I’ll take that as a no. Breakfast is eight *sharp*. Boiled eggs with toast soldiers today None for the tardy.”
I got dressed the moment she was gone, and looked for the phone. There wasn’t one. After a very quick wash—my bathroom had been designed for disabled people, it was all rounded edges and fitted with handrails—I hurried to Reception, determined to have due justice. I had acquired a limp but was unsure how. I was lost. Baroque music lilted in identical chair-lined corridors. A leprous gnome gripped my wrist and showed me a jar of hazelnut butter. “If you want to take this home, I’ll jolly well tell you why I *don’t.”*
“You’ve mistaken me for someone else.” I scraped the creature’s hand off mine and passed through a dining room area where the guests were seated in rows and waitresses were bringing bowls in from the kitchen.
What was so odd?
The youngest guests were in their seventies. The oldest guests were three hundred plus. Was it the week after the schools went back?
I had it. You probably spotted it pages ago, dear Reader.
Aurora House was a nursing home for the elderly
That ruddy brother of mine! This was his idea of a joke!
Mrs. Judd and her Oil of Olay smile were manning Reception. “Hello, Mr. Cavendish. Feeling super this morning?”
“Yes. No. An absurd misunderstanding has occurred.”
“Is that a fact?”
“It most certainly is a fact. I checked in last night believing Aurora House was a *hotel*. My brother made the booking, you see. But … oh, it’s his idea of a practical joke. Not in the least bit funny His contemptible ruse only ‘worked’ because a Rastafarian gave me a puff of a sinister cigar in Adlestrop, and also, the ruddy stem-cell twins who sold me my ticket here, they wore me out so. But listen. You have a bigger problem closer to home—some demented bitch called Noakes is running about the place impersonating a chambermaid. She’s probably riddled with Alzheimer’s, but yowie, she’s got a slap on her. She stole my keys! Now, in a go-go bar in Phuket, that’d be par for the course, but in an old wrecks’ home in Hull? You’d get closed down if I was an inspector, you know.”
Mrs. Judd’s smile was now battery acid.
“I want my keys back,” she made me say “Right away”
“Aurora House is your home now, Mr. Cavendish. Your signature authorizes us to apply compliancy And I’d get out of the habit of referring to my sister in those tones.”
“Compliancy? Signature? *Sister?”*
“The custody document you signed last night. Your residency papers.”
“No, no, no. That was the hotel registry! Never mind, it’s all academic. I’ll be on my way after breakfast. Make that before breakfast, I smelt the slops! My, this will make a heck of a dinner-party story Once I’ve strangled my brother. Bill him, by the way Only I must insist on having my keys returned. And you’d better call me a cab.”
“Most of our guests get cold feet on their first mornings.”
“My feet are quite warm, but I haven’t made myself clear. If you don’t—”
“Mr. Cavendish, why don’t you eat your breakfast first and—”

"Keys!"
"We have your written permission to hold your valuables in the office safe."
"Then I must speak with the management."
"That would be my sister, Nurse Noakes."
"No akes? Management?"
"Nurse Noakes."
"Then I must speak with the board of governors, or the owner."
"They would be me."
"Look." Gulliver and Lilliputians. "You're breaking the ruddy … Anti-Incarceration Act, or whatever it is."
"You'll find temper tantrums won't help you at Aurora House."
"Your telephone, please. I wish to call the police."
"Residents aren't permitted to—"
"I am *not* a ruddy resident! And since you won't give me back my keys, I'll be back later this morning with one very pissed-off officer of the law." I shoved the main door, but it shoved back harder. Some ruddy security lock. I tried the fire door across the porch. Locked. Over Mrs. Judd's protests I smashed a release catch with a little hammer, the door opened, and I was a free man. Ruddy hell, the cold smacked my face with an iron spade! Now I knew why northerners go in for beards, woad, and body grease. I marched down the curving driveway through worm-blasted rhododendrons, resisting a strong temptation to break into a run. I haven't run since the mid-seventies. I was level with a lawn mower contraption when a shaggy giant in groundsman's overalls rose from the earth like Ye Greene Knycht. He was removing the remains of a hedgehog from its blades with his bloody hands. "Off somewhere?"
"You bet I am! To the land of the living." I strode on. Leaves turned to soil beneath my feet. Thus it is, trees eat themselves. I was disorientated to discover how the drive wound back to the dining room annex. I had taken a bad turn. The Undead of Aurora House watched me through the wall of glass. "Soylent Green is people!" I mocked their hollow stares, "Soylent Green is made of people!" They looked puzzled—I am, alas, the Last of my Tribe. One of the wrinklies tapped on the window and pointed behind me. I turned, and the ogre slung me over his shoulder. My breath was squeezed out with his every stride. He *stank* of fertilizer. "I've better things to do than this …"
"Then go and do them!" I struggled in vain to get him in a neck-lock, but I don't think he even noticed. So I used my superior powers of language to chain the villain: "You cruddy ruddy rugger-bugger yob! This is assault! This is illegal confinement!"
He bear-hugged me several degrees tighter to silence me, and I am afraid I bit his ear. A strategic mistake. In one powerful yank my trousers were pulled from my waist—was he going to bugger me? What he did was even less pleasant. He laid me on the body of his mowing machine, pinned me down with one hand, and caned me with a bamboo cane in the other. The pain cracked across my unfleshy shanks, once, twice, again-again, again-again, again-again! Christ, such pain!
I shouted, then cried, then whimpered for him to stop. Whack! Whack! Whack! Nurse Noakes finally ordered the giant to desist. My buttocks were two giant wasp stings! The woman's voice hissed in my ear: "The world outside has no place for you. Aurora House is where you live now. Is reality sinking in? Or shall I ask Mr. Withers here to go over things one more time?"
"Tell her to go to hell," warned my spirit, "or you'll regret it later."
"Tell her what she wants to hear," shrieked my nervous system, "or you'll regret it *now.*"

The spirit was willing but the flesh was weak.

I was sent to my room without breakfast. I plotted vengeance, litigation, and torture. I inspected my cell. Door, locked from outside, no keyhole. Window that opened only six inches. Heavy-duty sheets made of egg-carton fibers with plastic undersheet. Armchair, washable seat cover. Moppable carpet. "Easy-wipe" wallpaper. "En suite" bathroom: soap, shampoo, flannel, ratty towel, no window. Picture of cottage captioned: "A House is Made by Hands, but a Home is Made by Hearts." Prospects for breakout: piss-poor.

Still, I believed my confinement would not last until noon. One of several exits must open up. The management would realize its mistake, apologize profusely, sack the Offending Noakes, and beg me to take compensation in cash. Or, Denholme would learn his gag had backfired and command my release. Or, the accountant would realize nobody was paying my bills and boot me out. Or, Mrs. Latham would report me missing, my disappearance would feature on *Crimewatch UK,* and the police would trace my whereabouts.

Around eleven the door was unlocked. I readied myself to reject apologies and go for the jugular. A once stately woman sailed in. Seventy years old, eighty eighty-five, who knows when they're that old? A rickety greyhound in a blazer followed his mistress. "Good morning," began the woman. I stood, and did not offer my visitors a seat.

"I beg to differ."

"My name is Gwendolin Bendincks."

"Don't blame me."

Nonplussed, she took the armchair. "This"—she indicated the greyhound—"is Gordon Warlock-Williams. Why don't you take a seat? We head the Residents' Committee."

"Very nice for you, but since I am not a—"

"I had intended to introduce myself at breakfast, but the morning's unpleasantness occurred before we could take you under our wing."

"All water under the bridge, now, Cavendish," gruffed Gordon Warlock-Williams. "No one'll mention it again, boyo, rest assured." Welsh, yes, he would have to be Welsh.

Mrs. Bendincks leant forward. "But understand this, Mr. Cavendish: boat rockers are not welcome here."

"Then expel me! I beg you!"

"Aurora House does not expel," said the sanctimonious moo, "but you will be medicated, if your behavior warrants it, for your own protection."

Ominous, no? I had seen *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* with an extraordinarily talentless but wealthy and widowed poetess whose collected works, *Verses Wild & Wayward,* I was annotating but who was less widowed than initially claimed, alas. "Look, I'm sure you're a reasonable woman." The oxymoron passed without comment. "So read my lips. I am *not supposed to be here*. I checked into Aurora House believing it to be a hotel."

"Ah, but we *do* understand, Mr. Cavendish!" Gwendolin Bendincks nodded.

"No you don't!"

"Everyone's visited by the Glum Family at first, but you'll soon cheer up when you see how your loved ones have acted in your best interests."

"All my loved ones' are dead or bonkers or at the BBC, except my prankster brother!" You can see it, can't you, dear Reader? I was a man in a horror B-movie asylum. The more I ranted and raged, the more I proved that I was exactly where I should be.

"This is the best hotel you'll ever stay in, boyo!" His teeth were biscuit colored. Were he a horse, you couldn't have given him away "A five-star one, look you. Meals get provided, all your laundry is done. Activities laid on, from crochet to croquet. No confusing bills, no youngsters joyriding in your motor. Aurora House is a ball! Just obey the regulations and stop rubbing Nurse Noakes up the wrong way She's not a cruel woman."

“ ‘Unlimited power in the hands of limited people *always* leads to cruelty.’ ” Warlock-Williams looked at me as if I had spoken in tongues. “Solzhenitsyn.”

“Betwys y Coed was always good enough for Marjorie and me. But look you here! I felt just the same in my first week. Barely spoke to a soul, eh, Mrs. Bendincks, a major sourpuss, eh?”

“A maximus sourpuss, Mr. Warlock-Williams!”

“But now I’m happy as a pig in clover! Eh?”

Mrs. Bendincks smiled, ’twas a ghastly sight. “We’re here to help you reorientate. Now, I understand you were in publishing. Sadly”—she tapped her head—“Mrs. Birkin is less able to record Residents’ Committee meeting minutes than she once was. A fine opportunity for *you* to jolly well get *involved!”*

“I still *am* in publishing! Do I *look* like I should be here?” The silence was intolerable. “Oh, get out!”

“Disappointed.” She gazed at the leaf-littered lawn, dotted with worm casts. “Aurora House is your world now, Mr. Cavendish.” My head was cork and the corkscrew was Gwendolin Bendincks. “Yes, you are in a Rest Home. The day has come. Your stay can be miserable or pleasant. But your stay is permanent. Think on, Mr. Cavendish.” She knocked on the door. Unseen forces let my tormentors exit but slammed it shut in my face.

I noticed that for the duration of the interview my flies had been wide open.

Behold your future, Cavendish the Younger. You will not apply for membership, but the tribe of the elderly will claim you. Your present will not keep pace with the world’s. This slippage will stretch your skin, sag your skeleton, erode your hair and memory, make your skin turn opaque so your twitching organs and blue-cheese veins will be semivisible. You will venture out only in daylight, avoiding weekends and school holidays. Language, too, will leave you behind, betraying your tribal affiliations whenever you speak. On escalators, on trunk roads, in supermarket aisles, the living will overtake you, incessantly. Elegant women will not see you. Store detectives will not see you. Salespeople will not see you, unless they sell stair lifts or fraudulent insurance policies. Only babies, cats, and drug addicts will acknowledge your existence. So do not fritter away your days. Sooner than you fear, you will stand before a mirror in a care home, look at your body, and think, E.T., locked in a ruddy cupboard for a

fortnight.

A sexless automaton brought lunch on a tray. I’m not being insulting, but I truly couldn’t tell if she or he was a he or a she. It had a slight mustache but tiny breasts too. I thought about knocking it out cold and making a Steve McQueen dash for liberty but I had no weapon except a bar of soap and nothing to tie it up with except my belt.

Lunch was a tepid lamb chop. The potatoes were starch grenades. The canned carrots were revolting because that is their nature. “Look,” I begged the automaton, “at least bring me some Dijon mustard.” It showed no evidence of understanding. “Coarse grain, or medium. I’m not fussy” She turned to go. “Wait! You—speak-ee— English?” She was gone. My dinner outstared me.

My strategy had been wrong from square one. I had tried to shout my way out of this absurdity but the institutionalized cannot do this. Slavers welcome the odd rebel to dress down before the others. In all the prison literature I’ve read, from *The Gulag Archipelago* to *An Evil Cradling* to *Knuckle Sandwich,* rights must be horse-traded and accrued with cunning. Prisoner resistance merely justifies an ever-fiercer imprisonment in the minds of the imprisoners.

Now was the season for subterfuge. I should take copious notes for my eventual compensation settlement. I should be courteous to the Black Noakes. But as I pushed cold peas onto my

plastic fork, a chain of firecrackers exploded in my skull and the old world came to an abrupt end.

AN ORISON OF SONMI~451

On behalf of my ministry, thank you for agreeing to this final interview. Please remember, this isn't an interrogation, or a trial. Your version of the truth is the only one that matters.

TRUTH IS SINGULAR. ITS "VERSIONS" ARE MISTRUTHS.

… Good. Ordinarily, I begin by asking prisoners to recall their earliest memories to provide a context for corpocratic historians of the future. Fabricants have no earliest memories,

Archivist. One twenty-four-hour *cycle* in Papa Song's is indistinguishable from any other.

Then why not describe this "cycle"?
If you wish. A server is woken at hour four-thirty by stimulin in the airflow, then yellow-up in our dormroom. After a minute in the hy-giener and steamer, we put on fresh uniforms before filing into the restaurant. Our seer and aides gather us around Papa's Plinth for Matins, we recite the Six Catechisms, then our beloved Logoman appears and delivers his Sermon. At hour five we man our tellers around the Hub, ready for the elevator to bring the new day's first consumers. For the following nineteen hours we greet diners, input orders, tray food, vend drinks, upstock condiments, wipe tables, and bin garbage. Vespers follows cleaning, then we

imbibe one Soapsac in the dormroom. That is the blueprint of every unvarying day

You have no rests?
Only purebloods are entitled to "rests," Archivist. For fabricants, "rests" would be an act of time theft. Until curfew at hour zero, every minute must be devoted to the service and

enrichment of Papa Song.

Do servers—unascended servers, I mean—never wonder about life outside your dome, or did you believe your dinery was *the whole cosmos?* Oh, our intelligence is not so crude that we cannot *conceive* of an outside. Remember, at Matins, Papa Song shows us pictures of Xultation and Hawaii, and AdV instreams images of a cosmology beyond our servery Moreover, we know both diners and the food we serve comes from a place not in the dome. But it is true, we rarely wonder about life on the surface. Additionally, Soap contains amnesiads designed to

deaden curiosity

What about your sense of time? Of the future?
Papa Song announces the passing hours to the diners, so I noticed the time of day, dimly, yes. Also we were aware of passing years by annual stars added to our collars, and by the Star

Sermon on New Year's Matins. We had only one long-term future: Xultation.

Could you describe this annual "Star Sermon" ceremony?
After Matins on First Day, Seer Rhee would pin a star on every server's collar. The elevator then took those lucky Twelvestarred sisters for conveyance to Papa Song's Ark. For the xiters, it is a momentous occasion: for the remainder, one of acute envy. Later, we saw smiling Sonmis, Yoonas, Ma-Leu-Das, and Hwa-Soons on 3-D as they embarked for Hawaii, arrived at Xultation, and finally were transformed into consumers with Soulrings. Our x-sisters praised Papa Song's kindnesses and xhorted us to repay our Investment diligently We marveled at their boutiques, malls, dineries; jade seas, rose skies, wildflowers; lace, cottages, butterflies; though we could not name these marvels.

I'd like to ask about the infamous Yoona~939.
I knew Yoona~939 better than any fabricant: some purebloods know more of her neurochemical history than me, but perhaps these individuals will be named later. On my awakening at Papa Song's, Seer Rhee assigned me to Yoona~939's teller. He believed it was aesthetically pleasing to alternate stemtypes around the Hub. Yoona~939 was tenstarred that year. She seemed aloof and sullen, so I regretted not being partnered with another Sonmi. However, by my first tenthday I had come to learn her aloofness was in fact watchfulness. Her sullenness hid a subtle dignity She decifered the orders of drunk customers, and warned me of Seer Rhee's ill-tempered inspections. In no small part it is thanks to Yoona~939 that I have survived as long as I have.

This "subtle dignity" you mention—was it a result of her ascension?
Postgrad Boom-Sook's research notes were so sparse I cannot be certain when Yoona~939's ascension was triggered, xactly However, I believe that ascension merely frees what Soap represses, including the xpression of an innate personality possessed by all fabricants.

Popular wisdom has it that fabricants don't have personalities.

This fallacy is propagated for the comfort of purebloods.

"Comfort"? How do you mean?
To enslave an individual troubles your consciences, Archivist, but to enslave a clone is no more troubling than owning the latest six-wheeler ford, ethically. Because you cannot discern our differences, you believe we have none. But make no mistake: even same-stem fabricants cultured in the same wombtank are as singular as snow-flakes.

Then I stand corrected. When did Yoona~939's deviances—perhaps I should say singularities—first become apparent to you?
Ah, questions of when are difficult to answer in a world without calendars or real windows, twelve floors underground. Perhaps around month six of my first year, I became aware of Yoona~939's irregular speech.

Irregular?

Firstly, she spoke more: during offpeak moments at our teller; as we cleaned the consumers' hygieners; even as we imbibed Soap in the dormroom. It amused us, even the stiff Ma-Leu-Das. Secondly, Yoona's speech grew more complex as the year aged. Orientation teaches us the lexicon we need for our work, but Soap erases xtra words we acquire later. So to our ears, Yoona's sentences were filled with noises devoid of meaning. She sounded, in a word, pureblood. Thirdly, Yoona took pleasure in humor: she hummed Papa's Psalm in absurd variations; in our dormroom, when aides were absent, she mimicked pureblood habits like yawning, sneezing, or burping. Humor is the ovum of dissent, and the Juche should fear it.

In my xperience, fabricants have difficulties threading together an original sentence of five words. How could Yoona~939—or you, for that matter—acquire verbal dexterity in such a hermetic world, even with a rising IQ?

An ascending fabricant absorbs language, thirstily, in spite of am-nesiads. During my ascension, I was often shocked to hear new words fly from my own mouth, gleaned from consumers, Seer Rhee, AdV, and Papa Song himself. A dinery is not a hermetic world: every prison has jailers and walls. Jailers are ducts and walls conduct.

A more metaphysical question … were you happy, back in those days?

Before my ascension, you mean? If, by *happiness,* you mean the absence of adversity I and all fabricants are the happiest stratum in corpocracy as genomicists insist. However, if *happiness* means the conquest of adversity or a sense of purpose, or the xercise of one's will to power, then of all Nea So Copros's slaves we surely are the most miserable. I endured drudgery but enjoy it no more than yourself.

Slaves, *you say? Even infant consumers know, the very word* slave *is abolished throughout Nea So Copros!*

Corpocracy is built on slavery, whether or not the word is sanctioned. Archivist, I do not wish to offend you, but is your youth dewdrugged or genuine? I am puzzled. Why has my case been assigned to an apparently inxperienced corpocrat?

No offense taken, Sonmi. I am an xpedience—and yes, an undewdrugged xpedi-ence, I am still in my twenties. The xecs at the Ministry of Unanimity insisted that you, as a heretic, had nothing to offer corpocracy's archives but sedition and blasphemy Genomicists, for whom you are a holy grail, as you know, pulled levers on the Juche to have Rule 54.iii—the right to archivism—enforced against Unanimity's wishes, but they hadn't reckoned on senior archivists watching your trial and judging your case too hazardous to risk their reputations—and pensions—on. Now, I'm only eighth-stratum at my uninfluential ministry, but when I petitioned to orison your testimony, approval was granted before I had the chance to come to my senses. My friends told me I was crazy.

So you are gambling your career on this interview?

… That is the truth of the matter, yes.

Your frankness is refreshing after so much duplicity

A duplicitous archivist wouldn't be much use to future historians, in my view. Could you tell me a little more about Seer Rhee? His journal weighed heavily against you at your trial. What manner of seer was he?

Poor Seer Rhee was corp man, to the bone, but long past the age when seers are promoted to power. Like many of this dying corpocracy's purebloods, he clung to the belief that hard work and a blemishless record were enough to achieve status, so he curfewed many nights in the dinery office to impress the corp hierarchy In sum: a whipman to his fabricants; a sycofant to his upstrata, and courteous to his cuckolds.

His cuckolds?
Yes. Seer Rhee should be understood in the context of his wife. Mrs. Rhee had sold her child quota early in their marriage, made shrewd investments, and used her husband as a dollar-udder. According to his aides' gossip, she spent most of our seer's salary on facescaping. Certainly, her seventy-plus years could pass for thirty Mrs. Rhee visited the dinery from time to time to inspect the latest male aides, gossip added. Any who spurned her advances could xpect a posting to bleakest Manchuria. But why she never used her apparent corp influence to advance Seer Rhee's career is a mystery I will not now live to see solved.

Yoona~939's notoriety must have threatened the seer's "blemishless record" severely, wouldn't you agree?
Certainly. A dinery server behaving like a pureblood attracts trouble; trouble attracts blame; blame demands a scapegoat. When Seer Rhee noticed Yoona's deviations from Catechism, he bypassed destarring and requested a corp medic to xamine her for reorientation. This tactical mistake xplains the seer's lackluster career. Yoona~939 performed as genomed, and the visiting medic gave her a clean bill. Seer Rhee was thenceforth unable to discipline Yoona without implying criticism of a senior corp medic.

When did Yoona~939 first attempt to make you complicit in her crimes?
I suppose the first time was when she xplained a newfound word, *secret,* one slow hour at the teller. The idea of knowing information no one else, not even Papa Song, knew was beyond my grasp, so as we lay in our cots my teller-sister promised to show me what she could not xplain.
When I next woke it was not to the glare of yellow-up but to Yoona, shaking me, in the near-dark. Our sisters lay dorming, immobile but for minute spasms. Yoona ordered me, like a seer, to follow her. I protested, I was afraid. She told me not to be, she wished to show me the meaning of *secret,* and led me into the dome. Its unfamiliar silence fritened me further: its beloved reds and yellows were eerie grays and browns in the curfew lite. Seer Rhee's office door leaked thin lite. Yoona pushed it open.
Our seer lay slumped on his desk. Drool glued his chin to his sony, his eyelids remmed, and a gurgle was trapped in his throat. Every tenthnite, Yoona told me, he would imbibe Soap and sleep thru to yellow-up. As you know, Soap affects purebloods more powerfully than us, and my sister kicked his unresponding body to prove the point. Yoona found my horror at this blasphemy merely amusing. "Do what you like to him," I remember her telling me. "He has lived with fabricants for so long he is very nearly one of us." Then she told me she would show me a greater secret still. Yoona xtracted Rhee's keys from his pocket and led me to the dome's north quarter. Between the elevator and the northeast hygiener, she told me to xamine the wall. I saw nothing. "Look again," Yoona urged, "look properly." This time I saw a speck, a tiny crack. Yoona inserted a key, and a rectangle in the dome wall swung inward. The dusty darkness gave no clue. Yoona took my hand; I hesitated. If wandering around the dinery during curfew was not a destarrable offense, entering unknown doorways surely was. But my

sister's will was stronger than mine. She pulled me through, shut the door behind us, and whispered, "Now, dear sister Sonmi, you are *inside* a secret."
A white blade sliced the black: a miraculous moving knife that gave form to the stuffy nothing. I discerned a narrow storeroom, crammed with stacked seats, plastic plants, coats, fans, hats, a burnt-out sun, many umbrellas; Yoona's face, my hands. My heart beat fast. What is that knife? I asked. "Only lite, from a flashlite," answered Yoona. I asked, Is lite alive? Yoona answered, "Perhaps lite *is* life, sister." A consumer had left the flashlite on a seat in our quarter, she xplained, but instead of giving it to our aide, Yoona had hidden it here. This confession shocked me most of all, in a way

How so?
Catechism Three teaches that for servers to keep anything denies Papa Song's love for us and cheats His Investment. I wondered, did Yoona~939 still observe *any* Catechism? But misgivings, though grave, were soon lost in the treasures Yoona showed me there: a box of unpaired earrings, beads, tiaras. The xquisite sensation of dressing in pureblood clothes overcame my fear of being discovered. Greatest of all, however, was a book, a picture book.

Not many of those around these days.
Indeed not. Yoona mistook it for a broken sony which showed the world outside. You must imagine our awe as we looked at the grimy server serving three ugly sisters; seven stunted fabricants carrying bizarre cutlery behind a shining girl; a house built of candy. Castles, mirrors, dragons. Remember, I was ignorant of these words as a server, as I was the majority of words I employ in this Testimony. Yoona told me AdV and 3-D show only a dull portion of the world beyond the elevator: its full xtent encompassed wonders even beyond Xultation. So many strangenesses in one curfew toxed my head. My sister said we must get back to our cots before yellow-up but promised to take me back inside her secret, next time.

How many "next times" were there?
Ten, or fifteen, approx. In time, it was only during these visits to her secret room that Yoona~939 became her animated self. Leafing through her book of outside, she voiced doubts that shook even my own love of Papa Song and faith in corpocracy to the core.

What shapes did these doubts take?
Questions: How could Papa Song stand on His Plinth in Chongmyo Plaza Servery *and* stroll Xultation's beaches with our Souled sisters simultaneously? Why were fabricants born into debt but purebloods not? Who decided Papa Song's Investment took twelve years to repay? Why not eleven? Six? One?

How did you respond to such blasphemous hubris?
I begged Yoona to stop, or at least to fake normalcy in the dinery I was a well-orientated server in those days, you see, not the evildoer, the threat to civilization, I am now. Moreover, I was scared of being destarred for failing to judas Yoona to Seer Rhee. I prayed to Papa Song to heal my friend, but her deviances became more blatant, not less. Yoona watched AdV openly as she wiped tables. Our sisters sensed her crimes and avoided her. One nite, Yoona told me that she wanted to xit the dinery and never come back. She told me I should xit too: that purebloods force fabricants to work in domes so they can enjoy the beautiful places her book

showed, her “broken sony” without sharing them. In response, I recited Catechism Six, I told her I could never commit such a wicked deviance against Papa Song and His Investment. Yoona~939 reacted angrily. Yes, Archivist, an angry fabricant. She called me a fool and coward, she said I was no better than those other clones.

Two un-Souled fabricants, fleeing their corp, unaided? Unanimity would round you up in five minutes.

But how could Yoona know that? Her “broken sony” promised a world of lost forests, folded mountains, and labyrinthine hiding places. To mistake a book of fairy tales for Nea So Copros may seem laughable to you, a pureblood, but perpetual encagement endows any mirage of salvation with credibility Ascension creates a hunger sharp enough to consume the subject’s sanity in time. In consumers, this state is termed chronic depression. Yoona had sunk to this same condition by my first winter, when diners brushed snow off their nikes and we had to mop the floors regularly. By then she had ceased communicating with me, so her isolation was total.

Are you saying mental illness triggered the Yoona~939 Atrocity?

I am, emphatically. Mental illness triggered by xperimental error.

Would you describe the events of that New Year’s Eve from your vantage point?

I was wiping tables on my quarter’s raised rim, so I had a clear view of the east. Ma-Leu-Da~108 and Yoona~939 were manning our busy teller. A children’s party was in progress. Balloons, streamers, and hats obscured the area around the elevator. Popsongs and noise of five hundred–plus diners reverbed round the dome. Papa Song was boomeranging 3-D fire-eclairs over the children’s heads: they passed thru their fingers and fluttered back to land on our Logo-man’s snaky tongue. I saw Yoona~939 leave our teller, the precise moment you understand, and I knew something terrible was going to happen.

She hadn’t told you of her escape plan?

As I said, she had ceased to acknowledge my xistence. But I do not believe she had a plan: I believe she merely “snapped,” in pureblood terms. My sister proceeded, unhurriedly, out of our quarter, toward the elevator. She was timing her approach. The aides were too busy to notice her: Seer Rhee was in his office. Few diners noticed, or looked up from their sonys or AdV, and why should they? When Yoona scooped up a boy in a sailor suit and headed for the elevator, the purebloods who saw merely assumed she was a fabricant maid ordered by her mistress to take her charge home.

Media reported that Yoona~939 stole the child to employ as a pureblood shield on the surface.

Media reported the “atrocity” xactly as Unanimity directed. Yoona carried the boy into the elevator because somehow she had learned of that basic precaution corps take: *elevators do not function without a Soul onboard*. The risk of being noticed aboard an elevator full of consumers was too high, so Yoona believed her best hope lay in borrowing a child and using his Soul to make an otherwise-empty elevator convey her to freedom.

You sound very sure of your thesis.

If my xperiences do not give me the right to be sure, whose do? The events that followed, I need not recount.

Nonetheless, please describe the Yoona~939 Atrocity, as you saw it.
Very well. The child's mother saw her son in Yoona's arms as the elevator doors closed. She screamed: "A clone's taken my boy!" A chain reaction of hysteria began. Trays were flung, shakes spilled, sonys dropped. Some diners believed the earthquake cushioning had malfunctioned and dived under the tables. An off-duty enforcer unholstered his colt, waded into the heart of the turmoil, and bellowed for order. He fired a sonicshot, ill-advisedly in a sealed space, causing many to believe terrorists were firing on consumers. I remember seeing Seer Rhee emerge from his office, slip on a spilled drink, and vanish under a swell of customers now stampeding for the elevator. Many were injured in this crush. Aide Cho was yelling into his handsony I could not hear what. Rumors ricocheted around the dome: a Yoona had kidnapped a boy, no, a baby no, a pureblood had kidnapped a Yoona; an enforcer had shot a boy no, a fabricant had hit the seer whose nose was bleeding. All the while, Papa Song surfed noodle waves on His Plinth. Then someone shouted that the elevator was descending, and silence seized the dinery as quickly as panic had less than a minute before. The enforcer shouted for space, crouched, and aimed at the doors. The crush of consumers cleared in an instant. The elevator reached the dinery, and its doors opened.
The boy was quivering, balled into one corner. His sailor suit was no longer white. Perhaps my last memory in the Litehouse will be Yoona~939's body, turned into a pulp of bullet holes.

That image is burned into every pureblood memory, too, Sonmi. When I got home that nite my dormmates were glued to the sony Half of Nea So Copros's New Year Festivities were canceled, the other half was decidedly muted. Media alternated footage from the in-dinery nikon with the Chongmyo Plaza public order nikon, showing the passing enforcer neutralize Yoona~939. We couldn't believe what we were seeing. We were sure a Union terrorist had facescaped herself to look *like a server, for twisted propaganda purposes. When Unanimity confirmed the fabricant was a genuine Yoona … we … I …*
You felt the corpocratic world order had changed, irrevocably You vowed never to trust any fabricant. You knew that Abolitionism was as dangerous and insidious a dogma as Unionism. You supported the resultant Homeland Laws dictated by the Beloved Chairman, wholeheartedly.

All of those, yes. What happened down in your dinery, meanwhile?
Unanimity arrived in force to blip every diner's Soul and to nikon eyewitnesses' accounts as the dome was evacuated. We cleaned the dinery and imbibed Soap without Vespers. The following yellow-up, my sisters' memories of Yoona~939's killing remained largely intact. That Matins, instead of the customary Starring Ceremony, Papa Song delivered His Anti-Union Sermon.

I still find it incredible that a Logoman told his fabricants about Union.
Such was the shock, the panic. Doubtless the Sermon's primary goal was to show Media that the Papa Song Corp had a damage control strategy in place. Papa Song's upstrata lexicon that Matins supports this theory. It was quite a performance.

Would you recount what you remember for my orison?
Our Logoman's head filled half the dome, so we seemed to stand inside his mind. His clownish xpression was heavy with grief and rage, and his clown's voice rang with despair. The Hwa-Soons trembled, the aides looked awed, and Seer Rhee was pasty and sick. Papa Song told us a gas called evil xists in the world; purebloods called terrorists breathe in this evil, and this gas makes them hate all that is free, orderly, good, and corpocratic; a group of terrorists called Union had caused yesterday's atrocity by infecting one of our own sisters, Yoona~939 of the Chongmyo Plaza Dinery, with evil; instead of judasing Union, Yoona~939 had let the evil take her into temptation and deviance; and were it not for the dedication of Unanimity with whom Papa Song Corp has always fully cooperated, a consumer's innocent son would now be dead. The boy had survived, but diners' trust in our beloved corp had been wounded, grievously. The challenge before us, Papa Song concluded, was to work harder than ever to earn back that trust.
Therefore: we must be vigilant against evil, every minute of every day. This new Catechism was more important than all others. If we obeyed, our Papa would love us forever. If we failed to obey, Papa would zerostar us year after year and we would never get to Xultation. Did we understand?
My sisters' understanding would have been hazy at best; our Logoman had used many words we did not know. Nevertheless, cries of "Yes, Papa Song!" echoed around the Plinth.
"I cannot hear you!" our Logoman xhorted us.
"Yes, Papa Song!" every server in every dinery in corpocracy shouted, *"Yes, Papa Song!"*

As I said, quite a performance.

You said in your trial that Yoona~939 couldn't have been a Union member. Do you still maintain that position?
Yes. How and when could Union recruit her? Why would a Union-man risk the xposure? Of what worth was a genomed server to a terrorist ring?

I'm puzzled. If amnesiads in Soap "nullify" memory, how come you can recall the events of that time with such precision and clarity?
Because my own ascension had already begun. Even to a thoroughbred imbecile like Boom-Sook, the degradation of Yoona~939's neurochemical stability was obvious, so another guinea pig was being prepared. The amnesiads in my Soapsac were reduced, accordingly, and ascension catalysts instreamed.

So … after the Sermon, New Year's Day was business as usual?
Business, yes; usual, no. The Starring Ceremony was perfunctory. Two Twelvestarreds were escorted into the elevator by Aide Ahn. These were replaced by two Kyelims. Yoona~939 was replaced by a new Yoona. Seer Rhee inserted our new stars into our collars in grave silence; applause was deemed inappropriate. Soon after, Media streamed in, flashing nikons and besieging the office. Our seer could get them out only by first letting them nikon the new Yoona lying in the elevator with a ~939 sticker on her collar, covered in tomato sauce. Later, Unanimity medics xamined each of us in turn. I was fritened of incriminating myself, but only my birthmark provoked any passing comment.

Your birthmark? I didn't know fabricants have birthmarks.

We do not, so mine always caused me embarrassment in the steamer.

Ma-Leu-Da~108 called it "Sonmi~451's stain."

Would you show it to my orison, just as a curio?

If you wish. Here, between my collarbone and shoulder blade.

Xtraordinary It looks like a comet, don't you think?

Hae-Joo Im made xactly the same remark, curiously

Huh, well, coincidences happen. Did Seer Rhee retain his position?
Yes, but it brought the unlucky man little solace. He reminded his corp xecs how he had "smelled deviance" on Yoona~939 months before, thus passing blame to the medic who xamined her. Chongmyo Plaza profits soon returned to average levels: purebloods have short memories where their stomachs are concerned. Kyelim~689 and Kyelim~889 were a further attraction: as a newly created stemtype, they drew queues of fabricant spotters.

And it was around this time that you grew aware of your own ascension?
Correct. You wish me to describe the xperience? It mirrored Yoona~939's, I now recognize. Firstly, a voice spoke in my head. It alarmed me greatly, until I learned that no one else could hear this voice, known to purebloods as "sentience." Secondly, my language evolved: for xample, if I meant to say *good,* my mouth substituted a finer-tuned word such as *favorable, pleasing,* or *correct*. In a climate when purebloods thruout the Twelve Cities were reporting fabricant deviations at the rate of thousands a week, this was a dangerous development, and I sought to curtail it. Thirdly, my curiosity about all things grew acute: the "hunger" Yoona~939 had spoken of. I eavesdropped diners' sonys, AdV, Boardmen's speeches, *anything,* to learn. I, too, yearned to see where the elevator led. Nor did the fact that two fabricants, working side by side on the same teller in the same dinery *both* xperienced these radical mental changes evade me. Lastly my sense of alienation grew. Amongst my sisters I alone understood our xistence's futility and drudgery. I even woke during curfew, but never entered the secret room, or even dared move until yellow-up. Yoona's doubts about Papa Song haunted me. Ah, I envied my uncritical, unthinking sisters. But most of all, I was afraid.

How long did you have to endure that state?
Some months. Until the ninthnite of the last week of fourth-month, specifically. I woke during curfew to a faint sound of breaking glass. My sisters were all dorming: only Seer Rhee was in the dome at such an hour. Time passed. Curiosity defeated my fear, finally, and I opened the dormroom door. Across the dome, our seer's office was open. Rhee lay in lamplite, face flat against the floor, his chair upended. I crossed the dinery. Blood leaked from his eyes and nostrils, and a used Soapsac was crumpled on the desk. Seer did not have the color of the living.

Rhee was dead? An overdose?
Whatever the official verdict, the office stunk of Soap soporifix. A server usually imbibes three milligrams: Rhee appeared to have taken a quarter-liter sac, so suicide seems a reasonable conclusion. I faced a grand quandary. If I sonyd for a medic, perhaps I could save my seer's

life, but how to xplain my intervention? Healthy fabricants, as you know, never wake during curfew. Bleak as the life of an ascending fabricant was, the prospect of reorientation was bleaker.

You said you envied your unthinking, untroubled sisters.
That is not quite the same as wishing to be one. I returned to my cot.

That decision didn't cause you any guilt, later?
Not much: Rhee's decision was his own. But I had a foreboding that the nite's events were not yet over, and sure enough, when yellow-up came, my sisters stayed in their cots. The air carried no scent of stimulin, and no aide had reported for work. I discerned the sound of a sony being used. Wondering if Seer Rhee had somehow recovered, I left the dormroom and looked into the dome.
A man in a dark suit sat there. He had tubed himself a coffee and watched me watching him across the dinery He spoke, finally. "Good morning, Sonmi~451. I hope you're feeling better today than Seer Rhee."

He sounds like an enforcer.
The man introduced himself as Chang, a chauffeur. I apologized: I did not know the word. A chauffeur, the soft-spoken visitor xplained, drives fords for xecs and Boardmen but sometimes serves as a messenger, too. He, Mr. Chang, had a message for me, Sonmi~451, from his own seer. This message was in fact a choice. I could leave the dinery now and repay my Investment outside, or else stay where I was, wait for Unanimity and their DNA sniffers to come and investigate the death of Seer Rhee, and be xposed as a Union spy.

Not much of a choice.
No. I had no possessions to pack or farewells to make. In the elevator, Mr. Chang pressed a panel. As the doors closed on my old life, my only life, I could not begin to imagine what waited above me.
My torso squashed my suddenly feeble legs: I was supported by Mr. Chang, who said every inside fabricant xperiences the same nausea, the first time. Yoona~939 must have dropped the boy as she underwent the same mechanical ascension in that same elevator. To dam the unpleasantness, I found myself recalling scenes from Yoona's broken sony: the cobweb streams, gnarled towers, the unnamed wonders. As the elevator slowed, my torso seemed to rise, dis-orientingly Mr. Chang announced, "Ground level," and the doors opened on outside.

I almost envy you. Please, describe xactly what you saw.
Chongmyo Plaza, predawn. Cold! I had never known cold. How *vast* it seemed, yet the plaza cannot be more than five hundred meters across. Around the feet of the Beloved Chairman, consumers hurried; walkway sweepers droned; taxis buzzed riders; inching fords fumed; crawling trashtrucks churned; thruways, eight lanes wide, lined by sunpoles; ducts rumbling underfoot; neonized logos blaring; sirens, engines, circuitry, new lite of new intensities at new angles.

It must have been overwhelming.
Even the smells were new, after the dinery's scented airflow. Kim-chi, fordfumes, sewage. A running consumer missed me by a centimeter, shouted, "Watch where you're standin', you democratin' *clone!"* and was gone. My hair stirred in the breath of a giant, invisible fan, and Mr. Chang xplained how the streets funnel the morning wind to high speeds. He steered me across the walkway to a mirrored ford. Three young men admiring the vehicle disappeared as we approached, and the rear door hissed open. The chauffeur ushered me inside and closed the door. I crouched. A bearded passenger slouched in the roomy interior, working on his sony He xuded authority Mr. Chang sat in front, and the ford edged into the traffic: I saw Papa Song's golden arches recede into a hundred other corp logos, and a new city of symbols slid by, most entirely new. When the ford braked, I lost my balance, and the bearded man mumbled that no one would object if I sat down. I apologized for not knowing the right Catechism here and intoned, "My collar is Sonmi~451," as taught in Orientation. The passenger just rubbed his red eyes and asked Mr. Chang for a weather report. I do not recall what the chauffeur said, only that the fordjams were bad, and the bearded man looking at his rolex and cursing the slowness.

Didn't you ask where you were being taken?
Why ask a question whose answer would demand ten more questions? Remember, Archivist, I had never seen an xterior, nor xperienced conveyance: yet there I was, thruwaying Nea So Copros's second biggest conurb. I was less a cross-zone tourist, more a time traveler from a past century
The ford cleared the urban canopy near Moon Tower, and I saw my first dawn over the Kangwon-Do Mountains. I cannot describe what I felt. The Immanent Chairman's one true sun, its molten lite, petro-clouds, His dome of sky. To my further astonishment, the bearded passenger was dozing. Why did the entire conurb not grind to a halt and give praise in the face of such ineluctable beauty?

What else caught your eye?
Oh, the greenness of green: back under the canopy, our ford slowed by a dew garden between squattened buildings. Feathery, fronded, moss drenched, green. In the dinery the sole samples of green were chlorophyll squares and diners' clothes, so I assumed it was a precious, rare substance. Therefore, the dew garden and its rainbows sleeving along the fordway astounded me. East, dormblocks lined the thruway each adorned by the corpocratic flag, until the waysides fell away and we passed over a wide, winding, ordure-brown strip empty of fords. I summoned up courage to ask Mr. Chang what it might be. The passenger answered: "Han River. Songsu Bridge."
I could only ask, what were these things?
"Water, a thruway of water." Tiredness and disappointment flattened his voice. "Oh, notch up another wasted early morning, Chang." I was confused by the difference between water in the dinery and the river's sludge. Mr. Chang indicated the low peak ahead. "Mount Taemosan, Sonmi. Your new home."

So you were taken to the University straight from Papa Song's?
To reduce xperimental contamination, yes. The road upzigged thru woodland. Trees, their incremental gymnastics and noisy silence, yes, and their greenness, still mesmerize me. Soon we arrived on the plateau campus. Cuboid buildings clustered: young purebloods paced narrow walkways where litter drifted and lichen yeasted. The ford coasted to a halt under a rain-

stained, sun-cracked overhang. Mr. Chang led me into a lobby leaving the bearded passenger to doze in the ford. Mount Taemosan's high air tasted clean, but the lobby was grimed and unlit. We paused at the foot of a double-helix staircase. This is an old-style elevator, Mr. Chang xplained. "The university xercises students' bodies as well as their minds." So I battled gravity for the first time, step by step, grasping the handrail. Two students descended the down-helix, laughing at my clumsiness. One commented, *"That* specimen won't be making a bid for freedom anytime soon." Mr. Chang warned me not to look over my shoulder; I did so, foolishly, and vertigo tipped me over. Had my guide not caught me, I would have fallen.

It took several minutes to ascend to the sixth floor, the topmost. Here, a slitted corridor ended at a door, slitely ajar, name-plated BOOM-SOOK KIM. Mr. Chang knocked, but no answer came.

"Wait in here for Mr. Kim," the chauffeur told me. "Obey him as a seer." I entered and turned to ask Mr. Chang what work I should do, but the chauffeur had gone. I was quite alone for the first time in my life.

What did you think of your new quarters?

Dirty Our dinery you see, was always spotless: the Catechisms preach cleanliness. Boom-Sook Kim's lab was, in contrast, a long gallery, rancid with pureblood male odor. Bins overflowed; a crossbow target hung by the door; the walls were lined with lab benches, buried desks, obsolete sonys, and sagging bookshelves. A framed kodak of a smiling boy and a dead, bloodied snow leopard hung over the only desk to show evidence of use. A filthy window overlooked a neglected courtyard where a mottled figure stood on a Plinth. I wondered if he was my new Logoman, but he never stirred.

In a cramped anteroom I found a cot, a hygiener, and a sort of portable steam cleaner. When was I to use it? What Catechisms governed my life in this place? A fly buzzed lazy figures of eight. So ignorant was I of outside, I even wondered if the fly might be an aide and introduced myself to it.

Had you never seen insects before?

Only rogue-gened roaches and dead ones: Papa Song's aircon inflows insecticide, so if any enter via the elevator, they die, instantly. The fly hit the window, over and over. I did not then know windows open; indeed, I did not know what a window was.

Then I heard off-key singing; a popsong about Phnom Penh Girls. Moments later a student in beach shorts, sandals, and silk weighed down by shoulder bags, kickboxed the door open. Upon seeing me he groaned, "What in the name of Holy Corpocracy are *you* doing here?"

I bared my collar. "Sonmi~451, sir. Papa Song's server from—"

"Shut up, shut up, I know *what* you are!" The young man had a froggish mouth and the hurt eyes then in vogue. "But you're not supposed to be here *until fifthday!* If those registry dildos xpect me to cancel a five-star Taiwanese conference just because they can't read calendars, well, sorry, they can suck *maggots* in an *ebola* pit. I only came in to pick up my worksony and discs. I'm not babysitting any xperimental clone still in uniform when I could be sinning myself sticky in Taipei."

The fly hit the window again; the student picked up a pamphlet and pushed past me. The whack made me jump. He inspected the smear with a laugh of triumph. "Let that be a warning to you! Nobody double-crosses Boom-Sook Kim! Now. Don't touch anything, don't go anywhere. Soap's in the boxfridge—thank Chairman they delivered your feed early. I'll be back late on sixthday If I don't leave for the aeroport *now* I'll miss my flite." He went, then reappeared in the doorway. "You *can* talk, can't you?"

I nodded.
"Thank *Chairman!* Fact—for every moronity there's ten registry clone-bones somewhere committing it as we speak."

What … were you supposed to do for the next three days?
Xcept watch the rolex hand erode the hours, I had no idea. It was no major hardship: servers are genomed for grueling nineteen-hour workdays. I passed idle hours wondering if Mrs. Rhee was a grieving widow or a glad one. Would Aide Ahn or Aide Cho be promoted to Chongmyo Plaza seer? Already, the dinery seemed impossibly distant. From the courtyard I heard pins and needles of sound, from shrubs mobbing the Plinth. Thus I first encountered birds. An aero overflew, and many hundreds of swallows poured upstream. For whom did they sing? Their Logoman? The Beloved Chairman?
The sky curfewed, and the room darkened for my first nite on the surface. I felt lonely, but nothing worse. Windows across the courtyard yellowed-up, showing labs like Boom-Sook's, housing young purebloods; neater offices, occupied by professors; busy corridors, vacant ones. I did not see a single fabricant.
At midnite I felt toxed and imbibed a sac of Soap, lay in the cot, and wished Yoona~939 was there to make sense of the day's legion mysteries.

Did your second day outside provide any answers?
Some: but yet more surprises. The first stood across the anteroom from my cot as I awoke. A pylonic man, over three meters tall and dressed in an orange zipsuit, was studying the bookshelves. His face, neck, and hands were scalded red, burnt black, and patched pale, but he did not seem to suffer pain. His collar confirmed he was a fabricant, but I could not guess his stemtype: lips genomed out, ears protected by hornvalves, and a voice deeper than any I heard before or since. "No stimulin here. You wake when you wake. Especially if your postgrad is as lazy as Boom-Sook Kim. Xec postgrads are the worst. They have their asses wiped for them. From kindergarten to euthanasium." With a giant, two-thumbed hand, he indicated a blue zipsuit half the size of his. "For you, little sister." As I changed from my Papa Song's uniform into my new garment, I asked if he had been sent by a seer. "No seers, either," said the burnt giant. "Your postgrad and mine are friends. Boom-Sook called yesterday. Complained about your unxpected delivery I wished to visit you pre-curfew. But Genome Surgery postgrads work late. Unlike slackers here in Psychogenomics. I'm Wing~027 Let's find out why you're here."
Wing~027 sat on Boom-Sook's desk and switched on the sony ignoring my protests that my postgrad had forbidden me to touch it. Wing clicked the screenboard; Yoona~939 appeared. Wing trailed his finger along the rows of words. "Let's pray to the Immanent Chairman … Boom-Sook doesn't make *that* error again …"
I asked Wing, could he read?
Wing said if a randomly assembled pureblood can read, a well-designed fabricant should learn with ease. Soon a Sonmi appeared on the sony: my collar, ~451, circled her neck. "Here," said Wing and read, slowly; *In-Dormroom Cerebral Upsizing the Service Fabricant: A Feasibility Case Study on Sonmi~4S1* by Boom-Sook Kim. "Why," Wing muttered, "is a no-brainer xec postgrad aiming so high?"

What sort of fabricant was Wing-oij? A militiaman?
No, a disasterman. He boasted he could operate in deadlands so infected or radioactive that

purebloods perish there like bacteria in bleach; that his brain had only minor genomic refinements; and that disastermen's basic orientation provides a more thoro education than most pureblood universities. Finally, he bared his hideously burnt forearm: "Show me a pureblood who could stand this! My postgrad's Ph.D. is tissue flameproofing."

Wing~027's xplanation of deadlands appalled me, but the disasterman anticipated their approach with relish. The day when all Nea So Copros is deadlanded, he told me, will be the day fabricants become the new purebloods. This sounded deviant, and besides, if these deadlands were so widespread in the world, I asked, why had I not seen them from the ford?

Wing~027 asked me how big I believed the world to be. I was unsure but said I had been driven all the way from Chongmyo Plaza to this mountain, so I must have seen most of it, surely

The giant told me to follow, but I hesitated: Boom-Sook had ordered me not to leave the room. Wing~027 warned me, "Sonmi~451, you must create Catechisms of your own," and slung me over his shoulder, carried me along the slitted corridor, around a tite corner, and up a dusty spiral staircase, where he fisted open a rusty door. Morning sunlite blinded, brisk winds slapped, and airgrit stung my face. The disasterman set me down.

On the roof of the Psychogenomics Faculty I gripped the railing and gasped; six levels down was a cactus garden, birds hunting insects in the needles; further down the mountain, a ford park, half full; further, a sports track, circummed by a regiment of students; below that, a consumer plaza; beyond that, woods, sloping down to the spilled, charred-and-neon conurb, hi-rises, dormblocks, the Han River, finally mountains lining the aeroscored sunrise. "A big view," I remember Wing's soft, burnt voice. "But held against the whole world, Sonmi~451, all you see is a chip of stone."

My mind fumbled with such enormity and dropped it; how could I understand such a limitless world?

Wing replied, I needed intelligence; ascension would provide this. I needed time; Boom-Sook Kim's idleness would give me time. However, I also needed knowledge.

I asked, How is knowledge found?

"You must learn how to read, little sister," said Wing~027

So Wing-oij, not Hae-Joo Im or Boardman Mephi, mentored you first?

That is not true, strictly. Our second meeting was our final one. The disasterman returned to Boom-Sook's lab an hour before curfew to give me an "unlost" sony preloaded with every autodidact module in upstrata corpocracy schooling. He showed me its operation, then warned me never to let a pureblood catch me gathering knowledge, for the sight scares them, and there is nothing a scared pureblood will not do.

By Boom-Sook's return from Taiwan on sixthday I had mastered the sony's usage and graduated from virtual elementary school. By sixthmonth I completed xec secondary school. You look skeptical, Archivist, but remember what I said about ascendants' hunger for information. We are only what we know, and I wished to be much more than I was, sorely.

I didn't mean to look skeptical, Sonmi. Your mind, speech, your … self, show your dedication to learning. What confuses me is, why did Boom-Sook Kim give you so much time to study? An xec heir, surely, was no covert Abolitionist? What about his Ph.D. xperiments on you?

Boom-Sook Kim's concerns were not his Ph.D. but drinking, gambling, and his crossbow. His father was an xec at Kwangju Ge-nomics lobbying for a boardmanship on the Juche until his son made such an influential enemy. With such an upstrata father, study was a mere

formality

But how was Boom-Sook planning to graduate?
By paying an academic agent to collate his thesis from the agent's own sources. A common practice. The ascension neurochemicals were preformulated for him, with yields and conclusions. Boom-Sook himself could not have identified the biomolecular properties of toothpaste. In nine months, my xperimental duties never xceeded cleaning his lab and preparing his tea. Fresh data might cloud those he had bought and risk xposing him as a fraud, you see.

So during my postgrad's long absences, I could study without risk of discovery.

Wasn't Boom-Sook Kim's tutor aware of this outrageous plagiarism?

Professors who value tenure do not muckrake the sons of future Juche Boardmen.

Did Boom-Sook never even talk to you … interact with you, in any way?
He addressed me like purebloods speak to a cat. It amused him to pose me questions he fancied were incomprehensible. "Hey, ~451, is it worth azuring my teeth, d'you reckon, or is sapphire just a passing fad this season?" He did not xpect cogent answers: I did not disabuse his xpectations. My reply became so habitual, Boom-Sook nicknamed me I-Do-Not-Know-Sir~451.

So for nine months nobody observed your skyrocketing sentience?
So I believed. Boom-Sook Kim's only regular visitors were Min-Sic and Fang. Fang's real name was never used in my hearing. They bragged about their new suzukis and played poker, and paid no attention to fabricants outside Huamdonggil comfort hives. Gil-Su Noon, Boom-Sook's neighbor, a downstrata postgrad on scholarship aid, banged on the wall to complain about the noise from time to time, but the three xecs banged back louder. I saw him only once or twice.

What is "poker"?
A card game where abler liars take money off less able liars. Fang won thousands of credits from Boom-Sook and Min-Sic's Souls during their poker sessions. Other times, the three students indulged in drugs, often Soap. On these occasions Boom-Sook told me to get out: when toxed, he complained, clones disturbed him. I would go to the faculty roof, sit in the water tank's shade, and watch swifts hunt giant gnats until dark, when I knew the three postgrads would be gone. Boom-Sook never bothered to lock his lab, you see.

Why was it that you never met Wing~027 again?
One humid afternoon, three weeks after my arrival at Taemosan, a knock on the door distracted Boom-Sook from his facescaper catalog. Unxpected visitors were rare, as I have said. Boom-Sook said, "Enter!" and hid his catalog under *Practical Genomics*. My postgrad rarely glanced at his texts, unlike me.
A wiry student poked the door open with his toe. "Boom-Boom," he called my postgrad. Boom-Sook sprang to attention, sat down, then slouched. "Hey, Hae-Joo"—he faked a casual manner— "what's up?"
The visitor was just passing to say hi, he claimed, but he accepted the offered chair. I learned

Hae-Joo Im was Boom-Sook's x-classmate but had been head-hunted by Taemosan's Unanimity faculty Boom-Sook told me to prepare tea while they discussed topics of no importance. As I served the drink, Hae-Joo Im mentioned, "You'll know about your friend Min-Sic's appalling afternoon by now?"

Boom-Sook denied Min-Sic was a "friend," necessarily, then asked why his afternoon was appalling. "His specimen, Wing~027, was burnt to bacon." Min-Sic had mistaken a minus for a plus on the label of a bottle of petro-alkali. My own postgrad smirked, giggled, snorted "Hysterical!" and laughed. Hae-Joo then did an unusual action; he looked at me.

Why is that unusual?

Purebloods see us often but look at us rarely Much later, Hae-Joo admitted he was curious about my response. Boom-Sook noticed nothing; he speculated about compensation claims by the corp sponsoring Min-Sic's research. In his own, solo research, Boom-Sook gloated, no one cared if an xperimental fabricant or two "got dropped" along the path of scientific enlitenment.

Did you feel … well, what did you feel? Resentment? Grief?

Fury. I retreated to the anteroom because something about Hae-Joo Im made me cautious, but I had never felt such fury Yoona~939 was worth twenty Boom-Sooks, and Wing~027 worth twenty Min-Sics, by any measure. Because of an xec's carelessness, my only friend on Mount Taemosan was dead, and Boom-Sook viewed this murder as humorous. But fury forges will. That day was the first step to my *Declarations,* to this prison cube, and to the Litehouse in a few hours.

What happened to you over summer recess?

Boom-Sook should have deposited me in a holding dormroom, but my postgrad was so eager to go hunt fabricant elk on Hokkaido in Eastern Korea that he forgot to do so, or assumed a lesser strata drone would do it for him.

So one summer morning, I woke in a wholly deserted building. No echoes from well-trafficked corridors, no time bell, no announcements; even aircons were turned off. From the roof, the conurb fumed and trafficked as usual, and swarming aeros left vapor streaks across the sky, but the campus was empty of students. Its ford parks were semivacant. Builders were resurfacing the oval square in the hot sun. I checked the sony's calendar and learned today was the beginning of recess. I bolted the lab's door and hid myself in the anteroom.

So you never set foot outside Boom-Sook's lab in five weeks? Not once?

Not once. I dreaded separation from my sony you see. A security guard tested the lab door every ninthnite. Sometimes I heard Gil-Su Noon in the adjacent lab. Otherwise, nothing. I kept the blind lowered and the solars off at nite. I had enough Soap to last the duration.

But that's fifty days of unbroken solitary confinement!

Fifty glorious days, Archivist. My mind traveled the length, breadth, and depth of our culture. I devoured the twelve seminals: Jong Il's *Seven Dialects;* Prime Chairman's *Founding of Nea So Copros;* Admiral Yeng's *History of the Skirmishes;* you know the list. Indices in an uncensored *Commentaries* led me to pre-Skirmish thinkers. The library refused many downloads, of course, but I succeeded with two Optimists translated from the Late English, Orwell and

Huxley; and Washington's *Satires on Democracy*.

And you were still Boom-Sook's thesis specimen—putatively—when he returned for the second semester?
Yes. My first autumn arrived. I made a secret collection of the flame-colored leaves that drifted on the faculty roof. Autumn itself aged, and my leaves lost their colors. Nites became icy; then even daylite hours frosted up. Boom-Sook dozed on the heated *ondul* most afternoons, watching 3-D. He had lost a lot of dollars in dubious investments over the summer, and since his father was refusing to pay his debts, my postgrad was prone to fits of temper. My only defense against these tantrums was to act void.

Did it snow?
Ah, yes, snow. The first snows fell very late last year, not until twelfth-month. I sensed it before I woke in the semidark. Snowflakes haloed the New Year fairies decorating the courtyard windows: entrancing, Archivist, entrancing. Undergrowth beneath the neglected statue in the courtyard drooped under the weight of snow, and the statue itself assumed a comic majesty I could watch the snow fall from my previous prison cube, and I miss it here. Snow is bruised lilac in half-lite: such pure solace.

You speak like an aesthete sometimes, Sonmi.

Perhaps those deprived of beauty perceive it most instinctively.

So it must be around now that Dr. Mephi enters the story?
Yes, Sextet Eve. It was snowing that nite, too. Boom-Sook, Min-Sic, and Fang burst in at hour twenty approx, tox-flushed, ice on their nikes. I was in the anteroom and barely had time to hide my sony I remember I was reading Plato's *Republic*. Boom-Sook wore a mortarboard hat, and Min-Sic hugged a basket of mint-scented orchids as big as himself. He threw them at me, saying, "Petals for Spoony, Sponny Sonmi, whatever its name is …"
Fang rifled the cupboard where Boom-Sook kept his *soju* and tossed three bottles over his shoulder, complaining that the brands were all dog piss. Min-Sic caught two, but a third smashed on the floor, triggering relapses of laughter. "Clean it up, Cind'rella!" Boom-Sook clapped his hands at me, then pacified Fang by saying hed open a bottle of the best stuff since Sextet Recess came only once a year.
By the time I had swept up every glass shard, Min-Sic had found a pornslash disney on 3-D. They watched it with xpert relish, bickering over its merits and realism, and drinking the fine *soju*. Their drunkenness had a recklessness that nite, especially Fang's. I retreated to the anteroom, from where I heard Gil-Su Noon at the lab door, asking the revelers to be quieter. I spied. Min-Sic mocked Gil-Su's glasses, asking why his family couldn't find the dollars to correct his myopia. Boom-Sook told Gil-Su to crawl up his own cock if he wanted peace and quiet when the civilized world was celebrating Sextet. When he had stopped laughing, Fang spoke about getting his father to order a tax inspection on the Noon clan. Gil-Su Noon fumed in the doorway until the three xecs pelted him away with plums and further derision.

Fang seems to have been the ringleader.
He was, yes. He chiseled open the fault lines in the others' personalities. Doubtless he is currently practicing law in one of the Twelve Capitals with great success. That nite he focused

on riling Boom-Sook, by wagging the *soju* bottle at the kodak of the dead snow leopard and asking how dopey the prey were genomed down for the tourists. Boom-Sook's pride was inflamed. The only animals *he* hunted, he retorted, were those with viciousness genomed *up*. He and his brother had stalked the snow leopard for hours in Kath-mandu Valley before the cornered animal leapt for his brother's throat. Boom-Sook had a single shot. The bolt entered the beast's eye in midair. Hearing this, Fang and Min-Sic faked awe for a moment, then collapsed in raucous laughter. Min-Sic thumped the floor, saying, "You are *so* full of shit, Kim!" Fang peered closer at the kodak and remarked that it was poorly dijied.

Boom-Sook inked a face on a synthetic melon, solemnly wrote "Fang" on its brow, and balanced the fruit on a stack of journals by the door. He took his crossbow from his desk, walked to the far-end window, and took aim.

Fang protested: "No-no-no-no-no-no-no!" and objected that a melon would not rip the marksman's throat out if he missed. There was no pressure to make a clean hit. Fang then beckoned me over to stand by the door.

I saw his intention, but Fang interrupted my appeal, warning that if I did not obey him, he would put Min-Sic in charge of my Soap. Min-Sic's grin wilted. Fang sank his nails into my arm, led me over, put the mortarboard hat on my head, and placed the melon on the hat. "So, Boom-Sook," he teased, "reckon you're such a hot-shit marksman *now?"*

Boom-Sook's relationship with Fang was based on rivalry and loathing. He raised his crossbow. I asked my postgrad to please stop. Boom-Sook ordered me not to move a muscle. The bolt's steel tip glinted. Dying in one of these boys' dares would be futile and stupid, but fabricants cannot dictate even the terms of their deaths. A twang and an airwhoosh later, the cross-bolt crisped into melon pulp. The fruit rolled off the hat. Min-Sic applauded warmly, hoping to thaw the situation. I was awash with relief.

However, Fang sniffed, "You hardly need laser guidance to hit a huge great melon. Anyway, look"—he held the melon's remains— "you only just clipped it. Surely a mango is a worthier target for a hunter of your stature."

Boom-Sook held out his crossbow to Fang, daring him to match his own skill: hit the mango from fifteen paces.

"Done." Fang took the crossbow. I protested, despairingly, but Boom-Sook told me to shut up. He drew an eye on the mango. Fang counted his paces and loaded the bolt. Min-Sic warned his friends that the paperwork on a dead xperimental specimen was hell. They ignored him. Fang aimed for a long time. His hand trembled, slitely Suddenly, the mango exploded and juiced the walls. My doubt that my ordeal was over was well founded. Fang blew on the crossbow. "Melon at thirty paces, mango at fifteen. I'll raise you a … *plum,* at ten." He noted a plum was still bigger than a snow leopard's eye, but added that if Boom-Sook wanted to admit he was indeed, as Min-Sic had said, full of shit and decline the challenge, they would consider the sorry chapter closed, for a whole ten minutes. Boom-Sook just balanced the plum on my head, gravely, and ordered me to hold very, *very* still. He counted his ten steps, turned, loaded, and took aim. I guessed I had a 50 percent chance of being dead in fifteen seconds. Gil-Su banged on the door again. *Go away,* I thought at him, *No distractions now …*

Boom-Sook's jaw twitched as he cranked back the bow. The banging on the door grew more insistent, just centimeters from my head. Fang blasted obscenities about Gil-Su's genitals and his mother. Boom-Sook's knuckles whitened on his crossbow.

My head was whipcracked around: pain sank teeth into my ear. I was aware of the door flying open behind me, then of xpressions of doom on my tormentors' faces. Lastly, I noticed an older man in the doorway, snow in his beard, out of breath, and thunderously angry.

Boardman Mephi?

Yes, but let us be thoro: Unanimity Professor, architect of the Mer-ican Boat-People Solution, holder of a Nea So Copros Medal for Eminence, monographist on Tu Fu and Li Po; Juche Boardman Aloi Mephi. I paid him little notice at that time, however. Liquid trickled down my neck and spine. When I dabbed my ear, pain seemed to electrocute the left side of my body. My fingers came away shiny and scarlet.

Boom-Sook's voice wobbled: "Boardman, we—" No help was offered from Fang or Min-Sic. The Boardman pressed a crisp silk handkerchief against my ear, and told me to keep the pressure steady. He took a handsony from an inner pocket. "Mr. Chang?" he spoke into it. "First aid. Hurry, please." Now I recognized the sleepy passenger who had accompanied me from Chongmyo Plaza eight months before.

Next, my rescuer stared at the postgrads: they dared not meet his gaze. "Well, gentlemen, we have made a very ominous start to the Year of the Snake." Min-Sic and Fang would be notified by the disciplinary board of major debits, he promised, and dismissed them. Both bowed and hurried out. Min-Sic left his cloak steaming on the *ondul* but did not return. Boom-Sook looked inconsolable. Boardman Mephi let the postgrad suffer for some seconds before asking, "Are you planning to shoot at *me* with that thing, too?"

Boom-Sook Kim dropped the crossbow as if it were superheated. The Boardman looked around the messy lab, sniffing at the neck of the *soju* bottle. The octopoid rapine on 3-D distracted him. Boom-Sook fumbled with the remo, dropped it, picked it up, pressed stop, aimed it the right way, pressed stop. Boardman Mephi spoke, finally He was now ready to hear Boom-Sook's xplanation of why he was using his faculty's xperimental fabricant for crossbow practice.

Yes, I'm curious to hear that, too.

Boom-Sook tried everything: he was inxcusably drunk for Sextet Eve; he had misprioritized, ignored stress symptoms, chosen friends unwisely, gotten overzealous while disciplining his specimen; it was all Fang's fault. Then even he realized he had better shut up and wait for the ax to fall.

Mr. Chang arrived with a medicube, sprayed my ear, dabbed coag, applied a patch, and gave me my first friendly words since Wing~027 Boom-Sook asked if my ear would heal. Boardman Mephi's abrupt answer was that it was none of Boom-Sook's business as his doctorate was terminated. The x-postgrad blanked and whitened as he saw his future slide downstrata.

Mr. Chang held my hand and informed me my earlobe was torn off but promised a medic would replace it in the morning. I was too afraid of Boom-Sook's recriminations to worry about my ear, but Mr. Chang added we would now leave with Boardman Mephi for my new quarters.

That must have been very welcome news.

Yes, xcept for the loss of my sony How could I bring that along? No feasible plan came to mind. I just nodded, hoping I could retrieve it during Sextet Recess. The spiral stairs took up my attention. descents are more hazardous than ascents. In the lobby, Mr. Chang produced a hooded cloak for me and a pair of icenikes. The boardman complimented Mr. Chang on the latter's choice of zebra-skin design. Mr. Chang answered, zebra skin was de rigueur in Lhasa's chicest streets this season.

What reason did the Boardman give for your timely rescue?
None, as yet. He told me I was being transferred to the Unanimity Faculty on the western lip of campus and apologized for letting "those three toxed xec tapeworms" play games with my life. The weather had prevented a timelier intervention. I forget what well-oriented, humble reply I gave.
The campus cloisters were festive with Sextet Eve crowds. Mr. Chang taught me to shuffle thru granular ice to gain traction. Snowflakes settled on my eyelashes and nostrils. Snowball fights ceasefired as Professor Mephi approached; combatants bowed. The sense of anonymity afforded by my hood was delicious. Passing thru cloisters, I heard music. Not AdV or popsong but naked, echoing waves of music. "A choir," Boardman Mephi told me. "Corpocratic sapiens can be callous, petty and malign," he said, "but higher things, too, thank Chairman." We listened for a minute. Looking up, I felt as if I was rushing upward.
Two enforcers guarding the Unanimity Faculty saluted and took our damp cloaks. This building's interior was as opulent as the Psychogenomics Faculty had been spartan. Carpeted corridors were lined with Iljongian mirrors, urns of the Kings of Scilla, 3-Ds of Unanimity notables. The elevator had a chandelier; its voice recited corpocratic Catechisms, but Boardman Mephi told it to shut up, and to my surprise, it did. Once again, Mr. Chang held me steady as the elevator sped, then slowed.
We xited into a spacious, sunken apartment from an upstrata lifestyle AdV A 3-D fire danced in the central hearth, surrounded by hovering maglev furniture. Glass walls afforded a dizzying view of the conurb by nite, obscured by the haze-brite snowfall. Paintings took up the inner walls. I asked Mephi if this was his office.
"My office is one story up," he replied. "These are your quarters."
Before I could even xpress surprise, Mr. Chang suggested I invite my distinguished guest to sit down. I begged Boardman Mephi's pardon: I had never had a guest before, and my manners lacked polish.
The maglev sofa swung under the distinguished man's weight. His daughter-in-law, he said, had redesigned my quarters with me in mind. The Rothko canvases, she hoped, I would find meditative."Molecule-true original originals," he assured me. "I approved.Rothko paints how the blind see."

A bewildering evening—crossbolts one moment, art history the next …
Certainly. Next, the professor apologized for failing to recognize the xtent of my ascension on our first meeting. "I assumed you were yet another semi-ascended xperiment, doomed to mental disintegration in a week or two. If memory serves, I even dozed off—Mr. Chang, did I? The truth now." From his post by the elevator, Mr. Chang recalled that his master had rested his eyes during the journey. Boardman Mephi smiled at his chauffeur's tact. "You're more than likely wondering what you did to bring yourself to my attention, Sonmi~451."
His question was a handshake: *Come out, I know you're in there*. Or, I feared, a trap. Still with a server's wariness of acting too pure-blood, I feigned polite incomprehension. Mephi's xpression of complicity told me he understood. Taemosan University he said, generates 2 million–plus library download requests per semester. The vast majority are course texts and related articles; the remainder relate to anything from real estate to stock prices, sportsfords to steinways, yoga to caged birds. "The point is, Sonmi, it takes a reader *of truly* eclectic habits for my friends the librarians to bother alerting me." The professor switched on his handsony and read from my own list of download requests. Sixthmonth 18th, *Epic of Gilgamesh;* Seventhmonth 2nd, Ireneo Funes's *Remembrances;* Ninthmonth 1st, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*. Mephi, bathed in mauve sonyglow, looked proud. "Here we go … Tenthmonth 11th, a

brazen-as-you-please cross-search for references to that cancer in our beloved body corpocratic, Union! Speaking as a Unanimityman, such a—could I call it lust'?—for creeds of other worlds alerts us to the presence of an inner émigré. It is idiomatic in my field that such émigrés make the finest Unanimity agents. I knew we had to meet." He then xplained how he had identified the sony's inquisitive owner as Nun Hel-Kwon, a geothermist from blizzard-prone Onsong … who had died two winters before in a skiing accident. Boardman Mephi assigned a gifted graduate the old-fashioned detective's task of tracing the thief. E-wave surveillance located the sony in Boom-Sook Kim's lab. Imagining Boom-Sook reading Wittgenstein defied all credulity however, so Mephi's trusted student had implanted a microeye in every sony in the room during curfew six weeks ago. "Next day we found our dissident-manqué was no pureblood but, apparently, science's first stabilized ascendant and sister-server of the notorious Yoona~939. My work, Sonmi~451, can be taxing and hazardous, but dull? Never!"

Denial was plainly pointless.
Indeed: Boardman Mephi was no Seer Rhee. In a way, my discovery was a relief. Many criminals say the same. I sat and listened to his account of the interdepartmental squabbles that broke out when he reported his findings. Old-school corpocrats wanted me euthanized as a deviant; psychogenomicists wanted me to undergo cerebral vivisection; marketing wanted to go public and claim me as Taemosan University's own xperimental breakthru.

Obviously, none of them got their way.
No. Unanimity won a stopgap compromise: I could continue studying in my illusory free will until a consensus of opinion could be reached. Boom-Sook's crossbow, however, forced Unanimity's hand.

And what did Boardman Mephi intend to do with you now?
Frame a new compromise between those interests competing fora slice of me, then enforce it. Billions of research dollars had been spent in corp labs, unsuccessfully, to achieve what, simply, I was, what I am: a stable, ascended fabricant. To keep the ge-nomicists happy, an array of vetted scientists would conduct cross-disciplinary tests on me. Mephi, dipping his hands into the heart of the 3-D flames, promised these tests would not be onerous or painful, or xceed three hours per day, five days out of ten. To win over the Taemosan Board, research access would be auctioned: I would raise big dollars for my masters.

Did Sonmi~451's interests enter this simultaneous equation?
To a degree, yes: Taemosan University would enroll me as a foundation student. I would also have a Soul implanted in my collar so I could come and go on campus as I pleased. Boardman Mephi even promised to mentor me when he was on campus. He withdrew his hand from the fire and inspected his fingers. "All lite, no heat. Youngsters nowadays wouldn't know a real flame if their nikes were set alite." He told me to call him Professor instead of Sir.

One thing I can't work out. If Boom-Sook Kim was such a buffoon, how had he attained this holy grail of psychogenomics—stable ascension?
Later, I asked Hae-Joo Im the same question. His xplanation ran: Boom-Sook's thesis jockey sourced his supply of psychogenomics theses from an obscure tech institute in Baikal. The

original author of my x-postgrad's work was a production zone immigrant named Yusouf Suleiman. Xtremists were killing genomicists in Siberia at that time, and Suleiman and three of his professors were blown up by a car bomb. Baikal being Baikal, Suleiman's research languished in obscurity for ten years until it was sold on. The agent liaised with contacts at Papa Song Corp to instream Suleiman's ascension neuro-formula to our Soap. Yoona~939 was the prime specimen; I was a modified backup. If all that sounds unlikely, Hae-Joo added, I should remember that most of science's holy grails are discovered by accident, in unxpected places.

And all the while Boom-Sook Kim was blissfully unaware of the furor his plagiarized Ph.D. was causing?

Only an obdurate fool who never squeezed a pipette could remain unaware, but yes, Boom-Sook Kim was such a fool. Maybe that, too, was no accident.

How did you find your new regime in the Unanimity Faculty? How was it as a fab-ricant, actually attending lectures?

As I was moved on Sextet Eve, I had six quiet days before the new regime began in earnest. I walked around the icy campus only once: I am genomed to be comfortable in hot eateries, and xposure to the Han Valley winter on Mount Taemosan burned my skin and lungs. On New Year's Day I awoke from curfew to discover two gifts: the battered old sony Wing~027 had given me and a star for my collar, my third. I thought of my sisters, my x-sisters, thruout Nea So Copros enjoying Starring Ceremonies. I wondered if I would one day depart for Xultation, my Investment repaid. How I wished Yoona~939 could attend my first lecture on secondday with me. I still miss her.

What was your first lecture?

Swanti's *Biomathematics;* however, its real lesson was humiliation. I walked to the lecture hall across dirty slush, hooded and unnoticed. But when I took off my cloak in the corridor, my Sonmi features provoked surprise, then unease. In the lecture hall, my entry detonated resentful silence.

It didn't last. "Oy!" a boy yelled. "One hot ginseng, two dog-burgers!" and the entire theater laughed. I am not genomed to blush, but my pulse rose. I took a seat in the second row, occupied by girls. Their leader had emeralded teeth. "This is *our* row," she said. "Go to the back. You stink of mayo." I obeyed, meekly A paper dart hit my face. "We don't vend burgers in your dinery fabricant," someone called, "why're you taking up space in our lecture?" I was about to leave when spidery Dr. Chu'an tripped onto the stage and dropped her notes. I did my best to concentrate on the lecture that followed, but after a while, Dr. Chu'an's eyes roamed her audience, saw me; she stopped midsentence. The audience, laughing, realized why. Dr. Chu'an forced herself to continue. I forced myself to stay but lacked the courage to ask questions at the end. Outside I endured a barrage of aggressive snideries.

Did Professor Mephi know about the students' unfriendliness?

I think so. At our seminar, the professor asked if my lecture had been fruitful; I chose the word *informative* and asked why pure-bloods despised me so. He replied, "What if the differences between social strata stem not from genomics or inherent xcellence or even dollars, but merely differences in knowledge? Would this not mean the whole Pyramid is built on shifting sands?"

I speculated such a suggestion could be seen as a serious de-viancy
Mephi seemed delited. "Try this for deviancy fabricants are mirrors held up to purebloods' consciences; what purebloods see reflected there sickens them. So they blame you for holding up the mirror."
I hid my shock by asking when purebloods might blame themselves.
Mephi replied, "History suggests, not until they are *made* to."
When, I asked, would that happen?
The professor spun his antique globe and answered merely: "Dr. Chu'an's lecture continues tomorrow."

It must have taken courage to return.
Not really: an enforcer escorted me, so at least no one flung insults at me. The enforcer addressed the second row of girls with courteous malice. "This is *our* row. Go to the back."
The girls melted away, but I felt no triumph. It was the girls' fear of Unanimity not their acceptance of me, that prevailed. Dr. Chu'an was so flustered by the enforcer that she mumbled her entire lecture without once looking at her audience. Prejudice is permafrost.

Did you brave any more lectures?
One, on Lööw's *Fundaments*. By request I went unescorted, preferring insults to xternal armor. I arrived early, took a side seat, and kept a visor on as the lecture hall filled. I was recognized nonetheless. The students regarded me with mistrust, but no paper missiles were launched. Two boys in front turned around: they had honest faces and rural accents. One asked if I really was some sort of artificial genius.
Genius is not a word to bandy so casually, I suggested.
Hearing a server talk made the pair marvel. "It must be hell," said the second, "to have an intelligent mind trapped in a body genomed for service."
I had grown as attached to my body as he had to his, I responded.
The lecture proceeded without event, but when I left the hall, a small riot of questions, miked walkmans, and flash nikons was waiting for me. Which Papa Song's had I come from? Who had enrolled me at Taemosan? Were there more of me? What were my views on the Yoona~939 Atrocity? How many weeks did I have before my ascension degenerated? Was I an Abolitionist? What was my favorite color? Did I have a boyfriend?

Media? On a corpocratic campus?
No, but Media had offered rewards for features on the Sonmi of Taemosan. I hooded and tried to elbow my way back to the Unanimity Faculty but the crush was so thick, my visor was knocked off and I was floored and badly bruised before two plainclothes enforcers could xtricate me. Boardman Mephi met me in the Unanimity lobby and escorted me back to my quarters, muttering that I was too valuable to xpose myself to the prurient mob. He rotated his rainstone ring vigorously: a habit when tense. We agreed, from then on my lectures should be dijied to my sony

What about the xperiments you were obliged to undergo?
Ah, yes, a daily reminder of my true status. They depressed my spirits. What was knowledge for, I would ask myself, if I could not use it to better my xistence? How would I fit in on Xultation nine years and nine stars later with my superior knowledge? Could am-nesiads erase

the knowledge I had acquired? Did I want that to happen? Would I be happier? Fourthmonth arrived, bringing my first anniversary as a specimen freak on Taemosan, but spring did not bring me the gladness it brings the world. My curiosity is dying, I told Professor Mephi one pleasant day, during a seminar on Thomas Paine. I remember the sounds of a baseball game drifting thru his open window. My mentor said we had to identify the source of this malady, and urgently. I said something about reading not being knowledge, about knowledge without xperience being food without sustenance.

"You need to get out more," remarked the professor.

Out where? Out to lectures? Out on the campus? Outings?

Next ninthnite, a young Unanimity postgrad named Hae-Joo Im elevatored to my apartment. Addressing me as Miss Sonmi, he xplained that Professor Mephi had asked him to "come and cheer you up." Professor Mephi held the power of life and death over his future, he said, so here he was. "That was a joke," he added, edgily then he asked if I remembered him.

I did. His black hair was crewcut maroon now, and his eyebrows on-offed where they had been unadorned; but I recognized Boom-Sook's x-classmate who had brought the news of Wing~027's death at the hands of Min-Sic. My visitor looked around my living space, enviously. "Well, this beats Boom-Sook Kim's poky nest, doesn't it? Big enough to swallow my family's entire apartment."

I agreed, the apartment was very spacious indeed. A silence inflated. Hae-Joo Im offered to stay inside the elevator until I wanted him to leave. Once again, I apologized for my lack of social grace and invited him in.

He took his nikes off, saying "No, *I* apologize for *my* lack of social grace. I talk too much when I get nervous, and say stupid things. Here I go again. Can I try out your maglev chaise longue?"

Yes, I said and asked why I made him nervous.

I looked like any Sonmi in any old dinery he answered, but when I opened my mouth I became a doctor of philosophy The postgrad sat cross-legged on the chaise longue and swung, wonder-ingly passing his hand through the magnetic field. He confessed, "A little voice in my head is saying, 'Remember, this girl—woman, I mean—I mean, person—is a landmark in the history of science. The first stable ascendee! Ascendant, rather. Watch what you say, Im! Make it profound!' That's why I'm just, uh, spouting rubbishy nothings."

I assured him I felt more like a specimen than like a landmark.

Hae-Joo shrugged and told me the professor had said I could use a nite out downtown, and he waved a Soulring. "Unanimity xpenses! Sky's the limit. So what's your idea of fun?"

I had no idea of fun.

Well, Hae-Joo probed, what did I do to relax?

I play Go against my sony I said.

"To *relax?*" he responded, incredulous. "Who wins, you or the sony?"

The sony, I answered, or how would I ever improve?

So winners, Hae-Joo proposed, are the real losers because they learn nothing? What, then, are losers? Winners?

I said, If losers can xploit what their adversaries teach them, yes, losers can become winners in the long term.

"Sweet Corpocracy"—Hae-Joo Im puffed—"let's go downtown and spend some dollars."

Didn't he irritate you a little?

Initially, he irritated me a lot, but I reminded myself that he was Professor Mephi's prescription

for my malaise. Also, Hae-Joo had paid me the compliment of referring to me as a "person." I asked him what he normally did on ninthnites, when not coerced into looking after prize specimens.

He told me with a diplomatic lowered smile how men of Mephi's stratum never coerce, only imply. He might go to a dinery or bar with classmates or, if he lucked out, go clubbing with a girl. I was not a classmate and not xactly a girl, so he suggested a galle-ria, to "sample the fruits of Nea So Copros."

Would he not be embarrassed, I asked, to be seen with a Sonmi? I could wear a hat and wraparounds.

Hae-Joo Im instead proposed a stick-on wizardly beard and a pair of reindeer antlers. I apologized: I had none. The young man smiled, apologized for another stupid joke, and told me to wear whatever I felt comfortable in, assuring me that I would blend in much better downtown than in a lecture hall. A taxi was downstairs, and he would wait for me in the lobby.

Were you nervous about leaving Taemosan?

Slitely yes. Hae-Joo distracted me by siteseeing talk. He directed the taxi via the Memorial to the Fallen Plutocrats, around Kyong-bokkung Palace, down the Avenue of Nine Thousand AdVs. The driver was a pureblood Indian with a sharp nose for fat fares from xpense accounts. "An ideal nite for Moon Tower, sir," he happened to mention. "Very clear." Hae-Joo agreed on the spot. The helter-way ascended the gigantic pyramid, high, high, high above the canopies, above everything xcept the corp monoliths. Have you been up Moon Tower by nite, Archivist?

No, not even by day. We citizens leave the Tower for the tourists, mostly.

You should go. From the 234th story, the conurb was a carpet of xenon and neon and motion and carbdiox and canopies. But for the glass dome, Hae-Joo told me, the wind at this altitude would fling us into orbit, like satellites. He indicated various humpbacks and landmarks: some I had heard of or seen on 3-D, some not. Chongmyo Plaza was hidden behind a monolith, but its dayblue stadium was visible. SeedCorp was the lunar sponsor that nite. The immense lunar projector on far-off Fuji beamed AdV after AdV onto the moon's face: tomatoes big as babies, creamy cauliflower cubes, holeless lotus roots. Speech bubbles ballooned from SeedCorp's logoman's juicy mouth, guaranteeing that his products were 100 percent genomically modified.

Descending, the elderly taxi driver spoke of his boyhood in a distant conurb called Mumbai, now deadlanded, when the moon was always naked. Hae-Joo said an AdVless moon would freak him out.

Which galleria did you go to?

Wangshimni Orchard: what an encyclopedia of consumables! For hours, I pointed at items for Hae-Joo to identify: bronze masks, instant bird's nest soup, fabricant toys, golden suzukis, air filters, acidproof skeins, oraculars of the Beloved Chairman and statuettes of the Immanent Chairman, jewel-powder perfumes, pearlsilk scarves, realtime maps, deadland artifacts, programmable violins. A pharmacy: packets of pills for cancer, aids, alzheimers, lead-tox; for corpulence, anorexia, baldness, hairiness, exuberance, glumness, dewdrugs, drugs for overindulgence in dewdrugs. Hour twenty-one chimed, yet we had not advanced beyond a single precinct. How the consumers seethed to buy, buy, buy! Purebloods, it seemed, were a sponge of demand that sucked goods and services from every vendor, dinery bar, shop, and nook.

Hae-Joo led me to a stylish café platform where he bought a styro of starbuck for himself and an aqua for me. He xplained that under the Enrichment Statutes, consumers have to spend a fixed quota of dollars each month, depending on their strata. Hoarding is an anti-corpocratic crime. I knew this already but did not interrupt. He said his mum feels intimidated by modern gallerias, so Hae-Joo usually works through the quota.
I asked him to tell me how it feels to be in a family.
The postgrad smiled and frowned at the same time. "A necessary drag," he confided. "Mum's hobby is collecting minor ailments and drugs to cure them. Dad works at the Ministry of Statistics and sleeps in front of 3-D with his head in a bucket." Both parents were random conceptions, he confessed, who sold a second child quota to get Hae-Joo genomed properly This let him aim for his cherished career: to be a Unanimityman had been his ambition since the disneys of his boyhood. Kicking down doors for money looked like a fine life.
His parents must love him very much to make such a sacrifice, I noted. Hae-Joo replied that their pension will come out of his salary Then he asked, had it not been a seismic shock to be uprooted from Papa Song's and transplanted into Boom-Sook's lab? Didn't I miss the world I had been genomed for? I answered, fab-ricants are oriented not to miss things.
He probed: Had I not ascended above my orientation?

I said I would have to think about it.

Did you xperience any negative reactions from consumers in the galleria? As a Sonmi outside Papa Song's, I mean.
No. Many other fabricants were there: porters, domestics, and cleaners, so I did not stand out so much. Then, when Hae-Joo went to the hygiener, a ruby-freckled woman with a teenage complexion but telltale older eyes apologized for disturbing me. "Look, I'm a media fashion scout," she said, "call me Lily. I've been spying on you!" And she giggled. "But that's what a woman of your flair, your *prescience,* my dear, must xpect."
I was very confused.
She said I was the first consumer she'd seen to facescape fully like a well-known service fabricant. Lesser strata, she confided, may call my fashion statement brave, or even antistrata, but she called it genius. She asked if I would like to model for "an abhorrently chic 3-D magazine." I'd be paid *stratospherically,* she assured me: my boyfriend's friends would *crawl* with jealousy. And for us women, she added, jealousy in our men is as good as dollars in the Soul.
I declined, thanking her and adding that fabricants do not have boyfriends. The mediawoman pretended to laugh at my imagined joke and xamined every contour on my face. She begged to know which facescaper had done me. "A craftsman like this, I have *got* to meet. Such a miniaturist!"
After my wombtank and orientation, I said, my life had been spent behind a counter at Papa Song's, and so I had never met my facescaper.

Now the fashion editor's laugh was droll but vexed.

So she couldn't believe you weren't *a pureblood?*
She gave me her card and urged me to reconsider, warning that opportunities like her do not happen ten days a week.
When the taxi dropped me at Unanimity Hae-Joo Im asked me to use his given name from then on. "Mr. Im" made him feel like he was in a seminar. Lastly, he asked if I might be free next ninthday I did not want him to spend his valuable time on a professorial obligation, I said, but

Hae-Joo insisted he had enjoyed my company I said, well, then, I accept.

So the xcursion helped dislodge your … sense of ennui?
In a way, yes. It helped me understand how one's environment is a key to one's identity but that my environment, Papa Song's, was a lost key. I found myself wishing to revisit my x-dinery under Chongmyo Plaza. I could not fully xplain why, but an impulse can be both vaguely understood and strong.

It could hardly be wise for an ascended server to visit a dinery?
I do not claim it was wise, only necessary Hae-Joo also worried that it might "unearth buried things." I responded that I had buried too much of myself, so the postgrad agreed to accompany me, on condition that I went disguised as a consumer. The following ninthnite he showed me how to upswirl my hair and apply cosmetics. A silk neck scarf hid my collar, and in the elevator down to the taxi he fitted dark ambers on my face.
On a busy fourthmonth evening, Chongmyo Plaza was not the litter-swarming wind tunnel I remembered from my release: it was a kaleidoscope of AdVs, consumers, xecs, and popsongs. Beloved Chairman's monumental statue surveyed his swarming peoples with an xpression wise and benign. From the Plaza's southeast rim, Papa Song's arches drew into focus. Hae-Joo held my hand and reminded me we could turn back at any time. As we got in line for the elevator, he slipped a Soulring onto my finger.

In case you got separated?
For good luck, I thought: Hae-Joo had a superstitious streak. As the elevator descended, I grew very nervous. Suddenly, the doors were opening and hungry consumers riptided me into the dinery As I was jostled, I was stunned at how misleading my memories of the place had been.

In what ways?
That spacious dome was so poky Its glorious reds and yellows, so stark and vulgar. The wholesome air I remembered: now its greasy stench gagged me. After the silence on Taemosan, the dinery noise was like never-ending gunfire. Papa Song stood on His Plinth, greeting us. I tried to swallow, but my throat was dry: surely my Logoman would condemn his prodigal daughter.
No. He winked at us, tugged himself skyward by his own nike-straps, sneezed, oopsied, and plummeted down to His Plinth. Children screamed with laughter. I realized, Papa Song was just a trick of lites. How had an inane hologram once inspired such awe in me?
Hae-Joo went to find a table while I circummed the Hub. My sisters smiled under sugary toplites. How unflaggingly they worked! Here were Yoonas, here was Ma-Leu-Da~108, her collar now boasting eleven stars. At my old counter on west was a fresh-faced Sonmi. Here was Kyelim~889, Yoona's replacement. I got in line at her teller, my nervousness growing acute as my turn approached. "Hi! Kyelim~889 at your service! Mouthwatering, magical, *Papa Song's!* Yes, madam? Your pleasure today?"
I asked her if she knew me.
Kyelim~889 smiled xtra to dilute her confusion.
I asked if she remembered Sonmi~451, a server who worked beside her, who disappeared one morning.
A blank smile: the verb *remember* is outside servers' lexicons. "Hi! Kyelim~889 at your

service! Mouthwatering, magical, *Papa Song's!* Your pleasure today?"
I asked, Are you happy, Kyelim~889?
Enthusiasm lit her smile as she nodded. *Happy* is a word in the Second Catechism: "Proviso I obey the Catechisms, Papa Song loves me; proviso Papa Song loves me, I am happy."
A cruel compulsion brushed me. I asked the Kyelim, didn't she want to live how purebloods live? Sit at dinery tables instead of wiping them?
Kyelim~889 wanted so badly to please, telling me, "Servers eat Soap!"
Yes, I persisted, but didn't she want to see Outside?
She said, Servers don't go Outside until Twelvestarred.
A consumer girl with zinc-ringlets and plectrum nails jabbed me. "If you've *got* to taunt dumb fabricants, do it on firstday mornings. I need to get to the gallerias *this* side of curfew, okay?"
Hastily, I ordered rosejuice and sharkgums from Kyelim~889. I wished Hae-Joo was still with me. I was jumpy in case the Soulring malfunctioned and xposed me. The device worked, but my questions had marked me as a troublemaker. "Democratize your *own* fabricants!" A man glowered as I pushed by with my tray *"Abolitionist."* Other purebloods in the line glanced at me, worried, as if I carried a disease.
Hae-Joo had found a free table in my old quarter. How many tens of thousands of times had I wiped this surface? Hae-Joo asked, gently, if I had discovered anything valuable.
I whispered, "We are just *slaves* here for twelve years."
The Unanimity postgrad just scratched his ear and checked no one was eavesdropping: but his xpression told me he agreed. He sipped his rosejuice. We watched AdV for ten minutes, not speaking: a Juche Boardman was shown opening a newer, safer, nuclear reactor, grinning as if his strata depended on it. Kyelim~889 cleared the table next to us; she had already forgotten me. My IQ may be higher, but she looked more content than I felt.
So your visit to Papa Song's was an … anticlimax? Did you find the "key" to your ascended self?
Perhaps it was anticlimactic, yes. If there was a key, it was only that no key xisted. In Papa Song's I had been a slave; at Taemosan I was a more privileged slave. One more thing occurred, however, as we headed back to the elevator. I recognized Mrs. Rhee, working at her sony I spoke her name out loud.
The immaculately dewdrugged woman smiled up with puzzled, luscious, remodeled lips. "I *was* Mrs. Rhee, but I'm Mrs. Ahn now. My late husband drowned in a sea-fishing accident last year."
I said that was just awful.
Mrs. Ahn dabbed her eye with her sleeve and asked if I had known her late husband well. Lying is harder than purebloods make it look, and Mrs. Ahn repeated her question.
"My wife was a qualities standardizer for the Corp before our marriage," Hae-Joo xplained hastily, putting his hand on my shoulder and adding that Chongmyo Plaza was in her area and that Seer Rhee had been an xemplary corp man. Mrs. Ahn's suspicions were aroused, however, and she asked xactly when that might have been. Now I knew what to say. "When his chief aide was a consumer named Cho."
Her smile changed its hue. "Ah, yes, Aide Cho. Sent north, somewhere, I believe, to learn about team spirit."
Hae-Joo took my arm, saying, "Well, All for Papa Song, Papa Song for All.' The gallerias beckon, darling. Mrs. Ahn is obviously a woman with no time to fritter."
Later, back in my quiet apartment, Hae-Joo paid me this compliment. "If *I* had ascended from server to prodigy in twelve straight months, my current address wouldn't be a guest quarter in the Unanimity Faculty: I would be in a psych ward somewhere, seriously. These … xistential qualms you suffer, they just mean you're truly human."

I asked how I might remedy them.
"You don't remedy them. You live thru them."

We played Go until curfew. Hae-Joo won the first game. I, the second.

How many of these xcursions took place?
Every ninthnite until Corpocracy Day. Familiarity bred esteem for Hae-Joo, and soon I shared Boardman Mephi's high opinion of him. The professor never probed about our outings during our seminars; his protégé probably filed reports, but Mephi wished me to have at least the illusion of a private life. Board business demanded more of his time, and I saw him less regularly. The morning tests continued: a procession of courteous but unmemorable scientists. Hae-Joo had a Unanimityman's fondness for campus intrigue. I learned how Taemosan was no united organism but a hillock of warring tribes and interest groups, much like the Juche itself. The Unanimity Faculty maintained a despised dominance. "Secrets are magic bullets," Hae-Joo was fond of saying. But this dominance also xplains why trainee enforcers have few friends outside the faculty Girls looking for husbands, Hae-Joo admitted, were attracted to his future status, but males of his own age eschewed getting drunk in his company.
Archivist, my appointment in the Litehouse is approaching. Can we segue to my final nite on campus?

Please do.
A keen passion of Hae-Joo's was disneys, and one perq of Professor Mephi's mentorship was access to forbidden items in the security archives.

You mean Union samizdat from the Production Zones?
No. I mean a zone even more forbidden, the past, before the Skirmishes. Disneys were called "movies" in those days. Hae-Joo said the ancients had an artistry that 3-D and Corpocracy had long ob-solesced. As the only disneys I had ever seen were Boom-Sook's pornsplatters, I was obliged to believe him. On sixthmonth's final ninthnite, Hae-Joo arrived with a key to a disneyarium on campus, xplaining that a pretty Media student was currying favor with him. He spoke in a theatrical whisper. "I've got a disc of seriously one of the greatest movies ever made by any director, from any age."

Namely?
A picaresque entitled *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish,* made before the foundation of Nea So Copros, in a long-deadlanded province of the European democracy. Have you ever seen film dating from the early twenty-first century, Archivist?

Sweet Corpocracy, no! An eighth-stratum archivist wouldn't get such security clearance in his wildest dreams! I'd be fired for even applying, and I'm shocked that even a Unanimity postgrad has access to such deviational material.
Is that so? Well, the Juche's stance on historical discourse is riddled with inconsistencies. On the one hand, if historical discourse were permitted, the downstrata could access a bank of human xperience that would rival, and sometimes contradict, that taught by Media. On the other hand, corpocracy funds your Ministry of Archivism, dedicated to preserving a historical record

for future ages.

Yes, but our xistence is kept from the downstrata.

Xcept from those condemned to the Litehouse.

Be that as it may, future ages will still be corpocratic ones. Corpocracy isn't just another political system that will come and go—corpocracy is the natural order, in harmony with human nature. But we're digressing. Why had Hae-Joo Im chosen to show you this Ghastly Ordeal*?*

Perhaps Professor Mephi had instructed him. Perhaps Hae-Joo Im had no reason xcept a fondness for the disney Whatever the reason, I was engrossed. The past is a world both indescribably different from and yet subtly similar to Nea So Copros. People sagged and uglified as they aged in those days: no dewdrugs. Elderly pure-bloods waited to die in prisons for the senile: no fixed-term life spans, no euthanasium. Dollars circulated as little sheets of paper and the only fabricants were sickly livestock. However, corpocracy was emerging and social strata was demarked, based on dollars and, curiously, the quantity of melanin in one's skin.

I can tell how fascinated you were …

Certainly: the vacant disneyarium was a haunting frame for those lost, rainy landscapes. Giants strode the screen, lit by sunlite captured thru a lens when your grandfather's grandfather, Archivist, was kicking in his natural womb. Time is the speed at which the past decays, but disneys enable a brief resurrection. Those since fallen buildings, those long-eroded faces: Your present, not we, is the true illusion, they seem to say. For fifty minutes, for the first time since my ascension, I forgot myself, utterly, ineluctably

Only fifty minutes?

Hae-Joo's handsony purred at a key scene, when the film's eponymous book thief suffered some sort of seizure; his face, contorted above a plate of peas, froze. A panicky voice buzzed from Hae-Joo's handsony; "It's Xi-Li! I'm right outside! Let me in! A crisis!" Hae-Joo pressed the remo-key; a wedge of light slid over the empty seats as the disneyarium door opened. A student ran over, his face shiny with sweat, and saluted Hae-Joo. He delivered news that would unravel my life, again. Specifically, forty or fifty enforcers had stormed the Unanimity Faculty arrested Professor Mephi, and were searching for us. Their orders were to capture Hae-Joo for interrogation and kill me on sight. Campus xits were manned by armed enforcers.

Do you remember your thoughts on hearing that?

No. I think, I did not think. My companion now xuded a grim authority that I realized had always been there. He glanced at his rolex and asked if Mr. Chang had been captured. Xi-Li, the messenger, reported that Mr. Chang was waiting in the basement ford park. The man I had known as Postgrad Hae-Joo Im, backdropped by a dead actor, playing a character scripted over a century ago, turned to me. "Sonmi~451, I am not xactly who I said I am."

SLOOSHA'S CROSSIN' AN' EV'RYTHIN' AFTER

Old Georgie's path an' mine crossed more times'n I'm comfy mem'ryin', an' after I'm died, no sayin' what that fangy devil won't try an' do to me … so gimme some mutton an' I'll tell you 'bout our first meetin'. A fat joocesome slice, nay, none o' your burnt wafery off'rin's …

Adam, my bro, an' Pa'n'me was trekkin' back from Honokaa Market on miry roads with a busted cart axle in draggly clothesies. Evenin' catched us up early, so we tented on the southly bank o' Sloosha's Crossin', 'cos Waipio River was furyin' with days o' hard rain an' swollen by a spring tide. Sloosha's was friendsome ground tho' marshy, no un lived in the Waipio Valley 'cept for a mil'yun birds, that's why we din't camo our tent or pull cart or nothin'. Pa sent me huntin' for tinder'n'firewood while he'n'Adam tented up.

Now, I'd got diresome hole-spew that day 'cos I'd ate a gammy dog leg in Honokaa, an' I was squattin' in a thicket o' ironwood trees upgulch when sudd'nwise eyes on me, I felt 'em.

"Who's there?" I called, an' the mufflin' ferny swallowed my voice.

Oh, a darky spot you're in, boy, murmed the mufflin' ferny

"Name y'self!" shouted I, tho' not so loud. "I got my blade, I have!"

Right 'bove my head someun whisped, *Name y'self, boy, is it Zachry the Brave or Zachry the Cowardy?* Up I looked an' sure 'nuff there was Old Georgie cross-leggin' on a rottin' ironwood tree, a slywise grinnin' in his hungry eyes.

"I ain't 'fraid o' *you!"* I telled him, tho' tell-it-true my voice was jus' a duck fart in a hurrycane. Quakin' inside I was when Old Georgie jumped off his branch an' then what happened? He dis'peared in a blurry flurryin', yay b'hind me. Nothin' there … 'cept for a plump lardbird snufflyin' for grubs, jus' askin' for a pluckin'n'a spit! Well, I reck'ned Zachry the Brave'd faced down Old Georgie, yay, he'd gone off huntin' cowardier vic'tries'n me. I wanted to tell Pa'n'Adam 'bout my eerie adventurin', but a yarnin' is more delish with broke-de-mouth grinds, so hushly-hushly up I hoicked my leggin's an' I crept up on that meatsome feathery buggah … an' I dived.

Mister Lardbird he slipped thru my fingers an' skipped off, but I wasn't givin' up, nay, I chased him upstream thru bumpy'n'thorny thickets, spring-heelin' dead branches'n'all, thorns scratched my face diresome, but see I'd got the chasin' fever so I din't notice the trees thinnin' nor the Hiilawe Falls roarin' nearer, not till I ran schnock into the pool clearin' an' giddied up a bunch o' horses. Nay, not wild horses, these was horses decked in studded leather armor an' on the Big Isle that means one thing only, yay, the Kona.

Ten–twelve of them painted savages was 'ready risin'n'reachin' for their whips'n'blades, yellin' war cries at me! Oh, now I legged it back downgulch the way I'd come, yay, the hunter was the hunted. The nearest Kona was runnin' after me, others was leapin' on their horses an' laughin' with the sport. Now panickin' wings your foot but it muddies your thinkin' too, so I rabbited back to Pa. I was only a niner so I jus' followed my instinct without thinkin' thru what'd happen.

I never got back to our tentin' tho', or I'd not be sittin' here yarnin' to you. Over a ropy root— Georgie's foot maybe— I tripped'n'tumblied into a pit o' dead leaves what hid me from the Kona hoofs thunderin' over me. I stayed there, hearin' them jagged shouts goin' by, jus' yards

away runnin' thru them trees … straight t'ward Sloosha's. To Pa'n'Adam.

I creeped slywise'n'speedy but late I was, yay, way too late. The Kona was circlin' our camp, their bullwhips crackin'. Pa he'd got his ax swingin' an' my bro'd got his spiker, but the Kona was jus' toyin' with 'em. I stayed at the lip o' the clearin', see fear was pissin' in my blood an' I cudn't go on. *Crack!* went a whip, an' Pa'n'Adam was top-sied an' lay wrigglyin' like eels on the sand. The Kona chief, one sharky buggah, he got off his horse an' walked splishin' thru the shallows to Pa, smilin' back at his painted bros, got out his blade an' opened Pa's throat ear to ear.

Nothin' so ruby as Pa's ribbonin' blood I ever seen. The chief licked Pa's blood off the steel. Adam'd got the dead shock, his spunk was drained off. A painted buggah binded his heels'n'wrists an' tossed my oldest bro over his saddle like a sack o' taro, an' others sivvied our camp for ironware'n'all an' busted what they din't take. The chief got back on his horse an' turned'n'looked right at me … them eyes was Old Georgie's eyes. *Zachry the Cowardy,* they said, *you was born to be mine, see, why even fight me?*

Did I prove him wrong? Stay put an' sink my blade into a Kona neck? Follow 'em back to their camp an' try'n'free Adam? Nay, Zachry the Brave Niner he snaky-snuck up a leafy hideynick to snivel'n'pray to Sonmi he'd not be catched'n'slaved too. Yay that's all I did. Oh, if I'd been Sonmi list'nin', I'd o' shooked my head di-gustly an' crushed me like a straw bug.

Pa was still lyin'n'bobbin' in the salt shallows when I sneaked back after night'd fallen; see, the river was calmin' down now an' the weather clearin'. Pa, who'd micked'n'biffed'n'loved me. Slipp'ry as cave fish, heavy as a cow, cold as stones, ev'ry drop o' blood sucked off by the river. I cudn't grief prop'ly yet nor nothin', ev'rythin' was jus' too shock'n'horrorsome, see. Now Sloosha's was six–seven up'n'down miles from Bony Shore, so I built a mound for Pa where he was. I cudn't mem'ry the Abbess's holy words 'cept *Dear Sonmi, Who art amongst us, return this beloved soul to a valley womb, we beseech thee*. So I said 'em, forded the Waipio, an' trogged up the switchblade thru the night forest.

An elf owl screeched at me, *Well fought, Zachry the Brave!* I yelled at the bird to shut up, but it screeched back, *Or else? You'll bust me like you bust them Kona? Oh, for the sake o my chicky-chick-chicks do have mercy!* Up in the Kohala Mountains, dingos was howlin', *Cowardyyy-yy-y Zachryyy-yy-y* Lastly the moon she raised her face, but that cold lady din't say nothin' nay she din't have to, I knowed what she thinked o' me. Adam was lookin' at that same moon, only two–three–four miles away, but for all I could help him, that could o' been b'yonder Far Honolulu. I bust open an' sobbed'n'sobbed'n'sobbed, yay like a wind-knotted babbit.

An uphill mile later I got to Abel's Dwellin' an' I hollered 'em up. Abel's eldest Isaak let me in an' I telled 'em what'd happened at Sloosha's Crossin', but … did I tell the hole true? Nay, wrapped in Abel's blankies, warmed by their fire'n'grinds, the boy Zachry lied. I din't 'fess how I'd leaded the Kona to Pa's camp, see, I said I'd just gone huntin' a lardbird into the thicket, an' when I got back … Pa was killed, Adam taken, an' Kona hoofs in the mud ev'rywhere. Cudn't do nothin', not then, not now. Ten Kona bruisers could o' slayed Abel's kin jus' as easy as slayin' Pa.

Your faces are askin' me. Why'd I lie?

In my new tellin', see, I wasn't Zachry the Stoopit nor Zachry the Cowardy I was jus' Zachry the Unlucky'n'Lucky Lies are Old Georgie's vultures what circle on high lookin' down for a runty'n'weedy soul to plummet'n'sink their talons in, an' that night at Abel's Dwellin', that runty'n'weedy soul, yay, it was me.

Now you people're lookin' at a wrinkly buggah, mukelung's nibblin' my breath away, an' I won't be seein' many more winters out, nay, nay, I know it. I'm shoutin' back more'n forty long years at myself, yay, at Zachry the Niner, *Oy, list'n! Times are you're weak gainst the*

world! Times are you can't do nothin! That ain't your fault, it's this busted world's fault is all!

But no matter how loud I shout, Boy Zachry, he don't hear me nor never will.

Goat tongue is a gift, you got it from the day you're borned or you ain't got it. If you got it, goats'll heed your say-so, if you ain't, they'll jus' trample you muddy an' stand there scornin'. Ev'ry dawnin' I'd milk the nannies an' most days take the hole herd up the throat o' Elepaio Valley, thru Vert'bry Pass to pasturin' in the Kohala Peaks. I herded Aunt Bees's goats too, theyd got fifteen–twenty goats, so all-telled I'd got fifty–sixty to mind'n'help their birthin' an' watch for sick uns. I loved them dumb beasts more'n I loved myself When rain thundered I'd get soaked pluckin' off their leeches, when sun burnt I'd crispen'n'brown, an' if we was high up in the Kohalas times was I'd not go back down for three–four nights run-nin', nay. You'd got to keep your eyes beetlin'. Dingos scavved in the mountains an' they'd try to pick off a wibbly newborn if you wasn't mindin' with your spiker. When my pa was a boy, savages from Mookini'd wander up from Leeward an' rustler away a goat or two, but then the Kona slaved the Mookini all southly an' their old dwellin's in Hawi went to moss'n'ants. We goaters we knowed the Kohala Mountains like no un else, the crannies'n'streams'n'haunted places, steel trees what the old-time scavvers'd missed, an' one-two–three Old Un buildin's what no

un knowed but us.

I planted my first babbit up Jayjo from Cutter Foot Dwellin' under a lemon tree one a-sunny day. Leastways hers was the first what I knowed. Girls get so slywise 'bout who'n'when'n'all. I was twelve, Jayjo'd got a firm'n'eager body an' laughed, twirly an' crazy with love we both was, yay jus' like you two sittin' here, so when Jayjo plummed up ripe we was talkin' 'bout marryin' so she'd come'n'live at Bailey's Dwellin'. We'd got a lot o' empty rooms, see. But then Jayjo's waters busted moons too soon an' Banjo fetched me to Cutter Foot, where she was laborin'. The babbit came out jus' a few beats after I'd got there.
This ain't a smilesome yarnie, but you asked 'bout my life on Big Island, an' these is the mem'ries what are minnowin' out. The babbit'd got no mouth, nay, no nose-holes neither, so it cudn't breathe an' was dyin' from when Jayjo's ma skissored the cord, poor little buggah. Its eyes never opened, it just felt the warm of its pa's hands on its back, turned bad colors, stopped kickin' an' died.
Jayjo she was clammy'n'tallow an' looked like dyin' too. The women telled me to clear out an' make space for the herb'list.
I took the died babbit wrapped in a woolsack to the Bony Shore. So lornsome I was, wond'rin' if Jayjo's seed was rotted or my seed was rotted or jus' my luck was rotted. Slack mornin' it was under the bloodflower bushes, waves lurched up the beach like sickly cows an' fell over. Buildin' the babbit's mound din't take as long as Pa's. Bony Shore had the air o' kelp an' flesh'n'rottin', old bones was lyin' 'mongst the pebbles, an' you din't hang 'bout longer'n you needed to, 'cept you was borned a fly or a raven.
Jayjo she din't die, nay, but she never laughed twirly like b'fore an' we din't marry, nay, you got to know your seeds'll grow a pure-birth or sumthin' close, yay? Or who'll scrape the moss off your roof an' oil your icon 'gainst termites when you're gone? So if I met Jayjo at a gath'rin' or bart'rin' she'd say, *Rainy mornin ain't it?* an' I'd answer, *Yay, rain till nightfall it will I reck'n,* an' we'd pass by. She married a leather maker from Kane Valley three years after, but I din't go to their marryin' feast.

It was a boy Our died no-name babbit. A boy

Valleysmen only had one god an' her name it was Sonmi. Savages on Big I norm'ly had more gods'n you could wave a spiker at. Down in Hilo they prayed to Sonmi if they'd the moodin' but they'd got other gods too, shark gods, volcano gods, corn gods, sneeze gods, hairy-wart gods, oh, you name it, the Hilo'd birth a god for it. The Kona'd got a hole tribe o' war gods an' horse gods'n'all. But for Valleysmen savage gods weren't worth knowin', nay, only Sonmi was real.

She lived 'mongst us, minderin' the Nine Folded Valleys. Most times we cudn't see her, times was she was seen, an old crone with a stick, tho' I sumtimes seen her as a shimm'rin' girl. Sonmi helped sick uns, fixed busted luck, an' when a truesome'n'civ'lized Val-leysman died she'd take his soul an' lead it back into a womb somewhere in the Valleys. Time was we mem'ried our gone lifes, times was we cudn't, times was Sonmi telled Abbess who was who in a dreamin', times was she din't … but we knew we'd always be re-borned as Valleysmen, an' so death weren't so scarysome for us, nay

Unless Old Georgie got your soul, that is. See, if you b'haved savage-like an' selfy an' spurned the Civ'lize, or if Georgie tempted you into barb'rism an' all, then your soul got heavy'n'jagged an' weighed with stones. Sonmi cudn't fit you into no womb then. Such

crookit selfy people was called "stoned" an' no fate was more dreadsome for a Valleysman.

The Icon'ry was the only buildin' on Bony Shore 'tween Kane Valley an' Honokaa Valley. There was no say-so 'bout keepin' out, but no un went in idlesome 'cos it'd rot your luck if you din't have no good reason to 'sturb that roofed night. Our icons, what we carved'n'polished'n'wrote words on durin' our lifes, was stored there after we died. Thousands of 'em there was shelfed in my time, yay each un a Valleysman like me borned'n'lived'n'reborned since the Flotilla what bringed our ancestors got to Big I to 'scape the Fall.

First time I went inside the Icon'ry was with Pa'n'Adam'n'Jonas when I was a sevener. Ma'd got a leakin' malady birthin' Catkin, an' Pa took us to pray to Sonmi to fix her, 'cos the Icon'ry was a spesh holy place an' Sonmi was norm'ly list'nin' there. Watery dark it was inside. Wax'n'teak-oil'n'time was its smell. The icons lived in shelfs from floor to roof, how many there was I cudn't tell, nay, you don't go countin' 'em like goats, but the gone-lifes outnumber the now-lifes like leafs outnumber trees. Pa's voice spoke in the shadows, fam'liar it was but eerie too, askin' Sonmi to halt Ma's dyin' an' let her soul stay in that body for longer, an' in my head I prayed the same, tho' I knowed I been marked by Old Georgie at Sloosha's Crossin'. An' then we heard a sort o' roaring underneath the silence, made o' mil'yuns o' whisp'rin's like the ocean, only it wasn't the ocean, nay, it was the icons, an' we knew Sonmi was in there list'nin' to us.

Ma din't die. Sonmi's got mercy, see.

My second time in the Icon'ry was Dreamin' Night. When fourteen notches on our icons said we was a growed Valleysman, we'd sleep 'lone in the Icon'ry an' Sonmi'd give us a spesh dreamin'. Some girls seen who they'd marry, some boys seen a way o' livin', other times we'd see stuff what we'd take to Abbess for an augurin'. When we left the Icon'ry in the mornin' we'd be men an' women.

So gone sunset I lay under my pa's blanky in the Icon'ry with my own uncarved icon as a pillow. Outside Bony Shore was rattlin'n'clackin' an' breakers was churnin'n'boilin' an' a whippoor-will I heard. But it weren't no whippoorwill, nay it was a trapdoor openin' right by me, an' a rope swingin' down into the underworld sky. *Climb down,* Sonmi telled me, so I did, but the rope was made o' human fingers'n'wrists weaved together. I looked up an' seen fire comin' down from the Icon'ry floor. *Cut the rope,* said a crookit man, but I was scared to 'cos

I'd o' fallen, yay?

Next dream, I was holdin' my freakbirth babbit boy in Jayjo's room. He was kickin'n'wrigglyin' like he'd done that day *Quick, Zachry,* said the man, *cut your babbit a mouth so he can breathe!* I'd got my blade in my hand so I carved my boy a smily slit, like cuttin' cheese it was. Words frothed out, *Why'd you kill me, Pa?*

My last dream had me walkin' 'long Waipio River. On the far side I seen Adam, fishin' happ'ly! I waved but he din't see me, so I ran to a bridge what ain't there in wakin' life, nay, a gold'n'bronze bridge. When fin'ly I got to Adam's side tho', I sobbed griefsome 'cos nothin' was left but mold'rin' bones an' a little silver eel flippy-flappin' in the dust.

The eel was dawnlight crackin' under the Icon'ry door. I mem'ried the three dreams an' walked thru the drizzly surf to Abbess without meetin' not a body. Abbess was feedin' her chicklin's b'hind the school'ry. She list'ned close to my dreamin's, then telled me they was slywise augurin's an' say-soed me to wait inside the school'ry while she prayed to Sonmi for their true meanin's.

The school'ry room was touched with the holy myst'ry o' the Civ'lize Days. Ev'ry book in the Valleys sat on them shelfs, saggy'n'wormy they was gettin' but, yay, they was books an' words o' knowin'! A ball o' the world there was too. If Hole World is a giant big ball, I din't und'stand why people don't fall off it an' I still don't. See, I'd not much smart in school'ry learnin', not like Catkin, who could o' been the next Abbess if all things happened diff'rent. School'ry windows was glass still unbusted since the Fall. The greatest of 'mazements tho' was the clock, yay, the only workin' clock in the Valleys an' in hole Big I, hole Ha-Why, far as I know When I was a schooler I was 'fraid of that tick-tockin' spider watchin'n'judgin' us. Abbessd teached us Clock Tongue but I'd forgot it, 'cept for *O'Clock* an' *Half Past*. I mem'ry Abbess sayin', *Civ'lize needs time, an if we let this clock die, time'll die too, an then how can we bring back the Civ'lize Days as it was b'fore the Fall?*

I watched the clock's tickers that mornin' too till Abbess came back from her augurin' an' sat 'cross from me. She telled me Old Georgie was hungerin' for my soul, so he'd put a cuss on my dreamin's to fog their meanin'. But Sonmi'd spoke her what the true augurin's was. An' you too you got to mem'ry these augurin's well 'cos they'll change the path o' this yarnin' more'n once.

One: *Hands are burnin, let that rope be not cut.*

Two: *Enemy's sleeping, let his throat be not slit.*

Three: *Bronze is burnin, let that bridge be not crossed.*

I 'fessed I din't und'stand. Abbess said she din't und'stand neither, but *I*'d und'stand when the true beat come, an' she made me nail her augurin's to my mem'ry. Then she gave me a hen's egg for brekker, still spitty'n'warm from the bird, an' showed me how to suck its yolk thru a straw.

So you want to hear about the Great Ship o' the Prescients?

Nay, the Ship ain't no mythy yarnin', it was real as I am an' you are. These here very eyes they seen it ooh, twenty times or more. The Ship'd call at Flotilla Bay twice a year, near the spring an' autumn half'n'halfs when night'n'day got the same long. Notice it never called at no savage town, not Honokaa, not Hilo, not Lee-ward. An' why? 'Cos only us Valleysmen got 'nuff Civ'lize for the Prescients, yay. They din't want no barter with no barb'rians what thinked the Ship was a mighty white bird god! The Ship was the sky's color so you cudn't see it till it was jus' offshore. It'd got no oars, nay, no sails, it din't need wind nor currents neither, 'cos it was driven by the Smart o' Old Uns. Long as a big islet was the Ship, high as a low hill, it carried two–three–four hundred people, a mil'yun maybe.

How did it move? Whered its journeyin's take it? Howd it s'vived all the flashbangin' an' the Fall? Well, I never knowed many o' the answers, an' unlike those o' most storymen, Zachry's yarns ain't made up. The tribe what lived on the Ship was called Pre-scients, an' they came from an isle named Prescience I. Prescience was bigger'n Maui, smaller'n Big I, an' far-far in the northly blue, more'n that I ain't knowin' or ain't sayin'.

So the Ship'd anchor 'bout ten throws off School'ry Head an' a pair o' littler hornety boats'd come out the Ship's prow an' fly over the surf to the beach. Each'd got six–eight men'n'women. Oh, ev'rythin' 'bout 'em was wondersome. Shipwomen too was man-some, see, their hair was sheared, not braided like Valleyswomen, an' they was wirier'n'strong. Their skins was healthy'n'smooth without a speck o' the scabbin', but brewy-brown'n'black they was all of 'em, an' they looked more alike'n other people what you see on Big I. An' Prescients din't speak much, nay. Two guards stayed by the shored boats an' if we asked 'em, *What's your name, sir?* or *Where you headed, miss?* they'd just shake their heads, like sayin', *I won't answer nothin, nay, so don't ask no more*. A myst'rous Smart stopped us goin' close up. The air got thicker till you cudn't go no nearer. A dizzyin' pain it gave you too so you din't donkey 'bout with it, nay

The barterin' took place in the Commons. Prescients spoke in a strange way, not lazy'n'spotty like the Hilo but salted'n'coldsome. By the time they'd landed, the yibber'd been busy an' most dwellin's was 'ready rushin' baskets o' fruits'n'veggies'n'meats'n'all to the Commons. Also the Prescients filled spesh casks with fresh water from the stream. In return, Prescients bartered ironware what was better'n any made on Big I. They bartered fair an' never spoke knuckly like savages at Honokaa, but politesome speakin' it draws a line b'tween you what says,*I respect you well 'nuff but you an I ain't kin, so don't you step over this line, yay?*

Yay the Prescients'd whoah strict rules 'bout barterin' with us. They'd not barter gear Smarter'n anythin' 'ready on Big I. For 'zample, after Pa was killed, a gath'rin' agreed to build a garrison by Abel's Dwellin' to protect the Muliwai Trail what was our main track from Sloosha's Crossin' into our Nine Valleys. Abbess asked the Prescients for spesh weapons to defend us from Kona. The Prescients said nay. Abbess begged 'em, more-less. They still said nay an' that was that.

'Nother rule was not to tell us nothin' 'bout what lay b'yonder the ocean, not even Prescience Isle, 'cept for its name. Napes of In-ouye Dwellin' asked to earn passage on the Ship, an' that was nearest I seen the Prescients all laugh. Their chief said nay an' no un was s'prised. We never pushed these rules to bendin' point, 'cos we reck'ned they did our Civ'lize an honor by barterin' with us. Abbess'd always invite 'em to stay for a feastin', but the chief'd always naysay politesome. Back to their boats they'd lug their bartered gear. An hour later the Ship'd be gone, eastly in spring, northly in fall.

So the visits was, ev'ry year, since anyun could mem'ry Until my sixteenth year, when a Prescient woman called Meronym visited my dwellin' for a spell, an' nothin'd be the same, not in my life, not in the Valleys, nay, not never.

Way back up b'hind Vert'bry Pass was a ridge called Moon's Nest what'd got the best view o' Windward from the Kohala pastures. One glitt'ry spring aft'noon I was herdin' up on Moon's Nest when I spied the Ship 'proachin' Flotilla Bay an' a whoah beautsome sight she was too, blue same as the ocean an' if you wasn't lookin' right at her you'd not see her, nay. Now I knowed I should o' gone quicksharp to the barterin' but, see, I'd the goats to minder'n'all an' by the time I got to the Commons the Prescients'd prob'ly be leavin' anyhow, so I stayed put an' lolled, gazin' on that wonder-some Ship o' Smart what came'n'went with the wild gooses an' whales.

Well, that's my reason for stayin', what I telled myself, tho' the true reason was a girl called Roses, who'd been gatherin' *palila* leafs for her ma's med'sun-makin'. We'd got a feverish hornyin' for each other, see, an' in that druggy skylarkin' aft'noon I was slurpyin' her lustsome mangoes an' moistly fig an' the true is I din't want to go nowhere else, an' Roses din't gather many *palila* leafs that day neither, nay. Oh, you're laughin' you blushin' young uns, but time was, yay I was jus' as you are now

Come evenin' when I herded my goats home, Ma was flappin' n'anxin' like a one-wing gander an' cussin' me so crazy it was Sussy what I got the hole yibber off. After barterin' at the Commons, the Prescient chief asked to speak to Abbess in private. After a long beat, Abbess'd come out o' the meet an' called a gath'rin'. Valleys-men from the nearby dwellin's was there, 'cept Bailey's, our dwellin'. See Ma'd not gone to the Commons neither. So the gath'rin' kicked off there'n'then. *The Prescient chief wants to make a spesh bart'rin this year,* said Abbess. *One Shipwoman wishes to live'n'work in a dwellin for half a year, to learn our ways an und'stand us Valleysmen. In return, the chief ll pay us double ev'rythin we bartered today Nets, pots, pans, ironware, ev'rythin double. Now think what an honor this is, an think o what we can get for all the gear at the next Honokaa Barter.* Well, it din't take long for one great *Yay!* to gather speed round the gath'rin', an' Abbess had to shout her next question over the rowdy. *Who's to host our Prescient guest?* Oh, that *Yay!* stopped cold. Folks sudd'nwise had hole bags o' 'scuses. *We ain't got 'nuff space. We got two babbits comin, our guest cudn't sleep well. The mozzies round our dwellin'd bite her to shreds.* Rusty Volvo that greasy buggah it was who first speaked it. *What 'bout Bailey's Dwellin?* See, Ma nor me wasn't there to coldwater the plan, an' it fired hot pretty quick. *Yay, they got empty rooms since Pa Bailey was killed! Baileys taked more out o Com-mons'n they put in last harvest, yay, it's their duty! Yay, they got need o workin hands at Bailey's, Ma Bailey'll be* glad *o the help!* An' so the gath'rin's say-so was settled.

Well, the one-wing gander now it was me, yay What do Pre-scients eat'n'drink? Do they sleep in straw? Do they sleep? Six moons! Ma was cussin' me for not goin' to the Ship Barter, an' even tho', yay, Ma was the real chief o' Bailey's, I was the oldest man o' the dwellin' so I should o' gone fair cop. I said, *Look I'll go to Abbess an tell her we can't host no Prescient here …* when *knock, knock, knock,* said our door.

Yay, it was Abbess bringin' the Prescient to move in, with Mylo the school'ry 'sistant. We all knowed we was lumbered with the Valleys' guest then, like it or not like it, we cudn't say *Get lost* now, yay? Itd bring shame to our roof an' shame to our icons. The Ship-woman she'd got that vin'gary stink o' Smart an' she spoke first, 'cos me'n'Ma was both tongue-knotted so. *Good evenin,* she said, *I'm Meronym, an I'm thankin you kindly for hostin my stay in the Valleys.* Mylo was grinnin' mocksome'n'toady at my anxin', I could o' killed him.

Sussy mem'ried her hostin' manners first, an' she settled our guests an' sent Jonas to fetch brew'n'grinds'n'all. Meronym speaked, *My people got a custom to give small presents to their hosts at the beginnin of a visit, so I hope you won't mind …* She reached into a bag what she'd bringed an' gived us presents. Ma got a fine pot what'd cost five–six bales o' wool at Honokaa, an' she was left breathy sayin' she cudn't accept such a presh gift 'cos welcomin' strangers was Sonmi's way, yay, welcomin' should be free or not at all, but the Prescient woman answered these gifts wasn't payments, nay, they was jus' thanks b'fore kindnesses, an' Ma din't refuse the pot a second time, nay Sussy'n'Catkin got neck-lesses what twinked starry, bug-eyed'n'joysome they was, an' Jonas got a hole square mirror what fass'nated him, brighter'n any busted shard what you still see now'n'again.

Mylo wasn't grinnin' so toadsome now, but I din't like this giftin' not a bit, nay, see this offlander was buyin' my kin sure 'nuff an' I wasn't havin' it. So I jus' said the Shipwoman could stay in our dwellin' but I din't want her gift an' that was that.

I said it ruder'n I meant, an' Ma looked spikers at me, but Meronym jus' said, *Sure I und'stand,* like I'd speaked ord'nary'n'norm'ly

Now a herd o' visitors bleated to our dwellin' that night an' some nights after, from up'n'down the Nine Valleys, kin'n'bros'n'lastlife fam'ly'n'half-strangers what we only met at bart'rin's, yay, ev'ryun from Mauka to Mormon came knockin' to see if Old Ma Yibber spoke it true, that a real'n'livin' Prescient was stayin' at Baileys. We'd got to invite ev'ry last visitor inside o' course an' they gaped in wonderment like Sonmi herself was sittin' in our kitchen, tho' their 'mazement weren't so great they cudn't chomp our grinds an' down our brew no worries, an' as they drank years o' questions 'bout Prescience an' their whoahsome Ship came pourin' thick'n'fast.

But the wyrd thing was this. Meronym seemed to answer the questions, but her answers didn't quench your curio none, nay, not a flea. So my cuz Spensa o' Cluny Dwellin' asked, *What makes your Ship move?* The Prescient answered, *Fusion engines*. Ev'ryun nodded wise as Sonmi, *Oh, fusion engines it is, yay,* no un asked what "fusion engine" was 'cos they din't want to look barb'ric or stoopit in front o' the gath'rin'. Abbess asked Meronym to show us Prescience Isle on a map o' the world, but Meronym jus' pointed to a spot an' said, *Here*. *Where?* we asked. See, there weren't nothin' but blue sea an' I for one thinked she was mickin' us mocksome.

Prescience I weren't on any map made jus' b'fore the Fall, Meronym said, 'cos Prescience's founders kept it secret. It was on older maps, yay, but not the Abbess's.

I'd got a bit o' the brave by now an' I asked our visitor why Pre-scients with all their high Smart'n'all want to learn 'bout us Val-leysmen? What could we poss'bly teach her what she din't know? *The learnin mind is the livin' mind,* Meronym said, *an any sort o Smart is truesome Smart, old Smart or new, high Smart or low*. No un but me seen the arrows o' flatt'ry them words fired, or how this crafty spyer was usin' our ign'rance to fog her true 'tentions, so I follered my first question with this pokerer: *But you Prescients got more greatsome'nmighty Smart'n this Hole World, yay?* Oh, so slywise she picked her words! *We got more'n the tribes o Ha-Why, less'n Old Uns b'fore the Fall*. See? Don't say a hole lot does it, nay?

I mem'ry jus' three honest answers she gived us. Ruby o' Potter's asked why Prescients'd all got dark skins like cokeynuts, nay, we'd never seen a pale un or pink un come off of their Ship. Meronym said her ancestors b'fore the Fall changed their seeds to make dark-skinned babbits to give 'em protection 'gainst the red-scab sickness, an' so them babbits' babbits also got it, like father like son, yay, like rabbits'n'cukes.

Napes o' Inouye Dwellin' asked, was she married, 'cos he was single an' had a macadnut orchard an' fig'n'lemon plantation all his own. Ev'ryun laughed, even Meronym smiled. She said she'd been married once, yay, an' had a son named Anafi livin' on Prescience I, but her husband'd been killed by savages years ago. She sorried losin' the chance o' them lemons'n'figs but she was too old for the husband market, an' Napes shaked his head in dis'pointment an' said, *Oh Shipwoman, you breaked my heart yay you do*.

Last up, my cuz Kobbery asked, *So how old are you?* Yay, that was what we was all wond'rin'. No un was ready for her answer tho'. *Fifty* Yay, that's what she said an' we was 'mazed as you are now. *Fifty* The air in our kitchen changed like the cold wind suddenwise comin'. Livin' to fifty ain't wondersome, nay, livin' to fifty is eerie an' ain't nat'ral, yay? *How old do Prescients live, then?* asked Melvil o' Black Ox. Meronym shrugged. *Sixty, seventy …* Oh, we all got the gaspin' shock! Norm'ly by forty we're prayin' Sonmi to put us out o' misery an' reborn us quick in a new body, like bladin' a dog's throat what you loved what was

sick'n'agonyin'. The only Valleysman who'd ever lived to fifty an' weren't flakin' with redscab or dyin' of mukelung was Truman Third, an' ev'ryun knowed how he'd done a deal with Old Georgie one hurrycanin' night, yay, that fool'd sold his soul for some extra years. Well, the yarnin' was busted prop'ly after that, an' folks left in gaggles to yibber what'd been said an' answered, ev'ryun whispin', *Thank Sonmi she's not stoppin in* our *dwellin.*

I was pleased our dammit crookit guest'd teached ev'ryun to step slywise an' not trust her, nay, not a flea, but I din't sleep none that night, 'cos o' the mozzies an' nightbirds an' toads ringin' an' a myst'rous someun what was hushly clatt'rin' thru our dwellin' pickin' up stuff here an' puttin' it down there an' the name o' this myst'rous someun was Change.

First, second, third days the Prescient woman was wormyin' into my dwellin'. Got to 'fess she din't b'have like no queeny-bee, nay, she never lazed a beat. She helped Sussy with dairyin' an' Ma with twinin'n'spinnin' an' Jonas took her bird-eggin' an' she list'ned to Catkin's yippin' 'bout school'ry an' she fetched water'n'chopped wood an' she was a quicksome learner. Course the yibber was keepin' a close eye on her an' visitors kept callin' to see the won-dersome fifty-year-old woman what jus' looked twenty-five years. Folks what s'pected her to be doin' tricks'n'whizzies was dis'pointed very soon 'cos she din't, nay. Ma she lost her anxin' 'bout the Ship-woman in a day or two, yay she started gettin' friendsome with her an' crowy too. *Our visitor Meronym this* an' *Our visitor Meronym that,* it was cockadoodlydooin' morn till night, an' Sussy was ten times badder. Meronym she jus' got on with her work, tho' at night she'd sit at our table an' write on spesh paper, oh so finer'n ours. A whoah fast writer she was, but she din't write in our tongue, nay, she wrote in some other speakin'. See, there was other tongues spoken in the Old Countries, not just ours. *What you writin 'bout, Aunt Meronym?* asked Catkin, but the Prescient jus' answered, *My days, pretty one, I'm writin 'bout my days.*

I hated her *pretty one* stuff in my fam'ly an' I din't like the way old folks came creepin' up askin' her for lowdown on how to live long. But her writin' 'bout the Valleys what no Valleysman could read, that anxed me most. Was it Smart or was it spyin' or was it the touch o' Old Georgie?

One steamin' dawn I'd done the milkin' when our guest asked to come herdin' the goats with me. Ma said yay, o' course. I din't say yay, I said, coolsome'n'stony *Grazin goats ain't int'restin for folks with so much Smart as you.* Meronym said politesome, *Ev'rythin Valleysmen do is int'restin' for me, Host Zachry, but course if you jus' don't want me to watch your work, that's fine, jus' come out an say-so.* See? Her words was slipp'ry wrestlers, they jus' flipped your *nay* into a *yay*. Ma was hawkeyein' me so, *Sure, fine, yay, come,* I'd got to say.

Herdin' my goats up Elepaio Track, I din't say nothin' else. Past Cluny's Dwellin' a bro o' mine, Gubboh Hogboy shouted, *Howzit, Zachry!* for a discussin', but when he seen Meronym he awked an' jus' said, *Go careful, Zachry.* Oh, I wished I could shruck that woman off my back, so I say-soed *Stop draggin, you slugger-buggahs,* to my goats an' hiked harder, hopin' to wear her out, see, upstream thru Vert'bry Pass we went but she din't quit, nay, not even on the rocky trail to Moon's Nest. Prescient tuff it's a match for goater tuff, I learnt it then. I reck'ned she knowed my thinkin' an' was laughin' at me, inward, so I din't speak nothin'

more to her.
What did she do when we reached Moon's Nest? She sat on Thumb Rock an' got out a writin' book an' sketched that whoah-some view. Oh, Meronym'd got whoahsome drawin'-Smart I got to 'fess. On that paper the Nine Folded Valleys appeared an' the coast'n'headlands, an' highlands'n'lowgrounds, jus' as real as the real uns. I din't want to give her no int'rest, but I cudn't stop me. I named ev'rythin' she'd marked, an' she wrote the names until it was half-picturin' half-writin', I said. *'Zactly so,* said Meronym, *it's a map we done here.*
Now. I heard a twig snappin' in a fringe o' firs b'hind us. Not the fluky wind it weren't, nay, it was a leg done it sure 'nuff but a foot or hoof or claw I cudn't tell. Kona up the Windward Kohalas weren't knowed but so weren't Kona at Sloosha's Crossin', nay, so into that thicket I went for a look-see. Meronym wanted to come with me but I telled her to stay put. Could it be Old Georgie come back to stone my soul some more? Or jus' a hermity Mookini wand'rin' for grinds? I'd got my spiker an' I crept nearer the firs, nearer the firs …
Roses sat straddlin' a mossy fat stump. *See you got fresh comp'ny,* she said politesome, but there was a furyin' dingo bitch in her eyes.
Her? I pointed back at Meronym, who sat watchin' us talk. *Ain't yibber telled you, the Shipwoman's older'n my granny was when Sonmi reborned her! Don't be jealous o* her*! She ain't like you, Roses. She's got so much Smart in her head she's got a busted neck*
Roses weren't politesome now. *So I ain't got no Smart?*
Women, oh, women! They'll find the baddest meanin' in your words an' hold it up, sayin', *Look what you attacked me with!* Lust-bonered hothead what I was, a bit o' knuckly talkin'd cure Roses's senses, so I reck'ned. *You know that ain't what I'm sayin you dumb vamoosin bint—*
I din't finish speakin' my cure 'cos Roses schnockoed my face so hard the ground dived forward an' I crashed on my jaxy So shocked I was I jus' sat there like a dropped babbit, I dabbed my nose an' my fingers was red. *Oh,* said Roses, then *Ha!* then, *You can bitchmouth your nanny goats all you wants, herder, but not me, so Old Georgie stone your soul!* Our lovin'n'throbbin' was smashed to a mil'yun ittybitties an' off Roses went then, swingin' her basket.

Mis'ry'n'barrassment are hungersome for blame, an' what I blamed for losin' Roses was the dammit Prescient. That mornin' on Moon's Nest I got up an' hollered my goats an' droved 'em to Thumb Pasture without even sayin' good-bye to Meronym. She'd got 'nuff Smart to leave me be, mem'ry she'd got a son o' her own back on Prescience I.
When I got home that evenin', Ma'n'Sussy'n'Jonas was sittin' round. They seen my nose an' looked slywise at each other. *What happened to your conker there, bro?* Jonas asked, all la-di-da. *This? Oh, I slipped'n'schnockoed it on Moon's Nest,* I telled him quicksharp.
Sussy sort o' snigged. *You don't mean you schnockoed it on Roses's Nest there, bro Zachry?* an' all three of 'em cackled like a danglin' o' screech bats an' I redded diresome'n'steamin'. Sissy telled me she'd got the yibber off Roses's cuz Wolt, what'd telled Bejesus, what'd met Sissy, but I wasn't really list'nin', nay, *I* was cussin' Meronym to Old Georgie, an' I din't stop, an' it's a bless she weren't at Bailey's that night, nay, she was learnin' loomin' at Aunt Bees's.
So down I went to the ocean an' watched Lady Moon to cool my fiery mis'ry. A greenbill came draggin' itself up the beach to lay eggs I mem'ry, an' I nearly spikered the turtle there'n'then out o' spite, see, if my life weren't fair why should an animal's be? But I seen its eyes, so ancient was its eyes they seen the future, yay an' I let the turtle go.
Gubboh'n'Kobbery came troopin' with their boards an' started surfin' in the starry water, a

whoah beautsome surfer was Kobbery an' they called me to join 'em but I weren't in no surfin' mood, nay, I'd got more soberin' bis'ness to push at with Abbess at the school'ry So there I went an' spoke my worryin's for a long beat.

Abbess she list'ned, but she din't b'lief me none, nay, she thinked I was jus' wrigglyin' out o' hostin' Meronym. *You seen the Ship, an you seen their ironware, an you seen the bit o the Smart they'll show us. If Prescients was plannin on invadin Nine Valleys, d'you truesome reck'n we'd be sittin here discussin it? Bring me ev'dence Meronym's plannin to murder us all in our beds, I'll summon a gath'rin. If you ain't got ev'dence, well, hold your counsel. Makin 'cusations gainst a spesh guest, it jus ain't politesome, Zachry, an' your pa'd not o been pleased.*

Our Abbess never stamped her say-sos on no un, but you knew when the discussin' was over.

That was it, then, I was on my own, yay Zachry 'gainst the Prescients.

Days rose'n'fell an' summer hotted up green'n'foamy I watched Meronym wormy her way round all the Valleys, meetin' folk an' learnin' how we lived, what we owned, how many of us could fight, an' mappin' passes into the Valleys thru the Kohalas. One or two o' the older'n'cunninger men, I tried to suss out if they'd got any doubts or anxin's 'bout the Prescient, but when I said *invade* or *attack* they looked shocked'n's'prised spikers at me'n'my accusin's so I got shamed an' I shut up, see, I din't want yibber smearin' me. I should fake a bit o' manners to Meronym so she may get lazy an' let her friendsome mask slip a littl' an' show me her true plannin's b'hind that mask, yay, give me some ev'dence I could show to Abbess an' summon a gath'rin'.

I din't have no choice to wait'n'see. Meronym was truesome pop'lar. Women 'fessed stuff to her 'cos she was an outsider an' she'd not tell Old Ma Yibber no secrets. Abbess asked our guest to teach numbers at the school'ry an' Meronym said yay Catkin said she was a good teacher but din't teach 'em nothin' b'yonder Abbess's own Smart tho' Catkin knowed she could o' done if shed o' wanted. Some schoolers even started inkin' their faces blacker to look like a Prescient, but Meronym telled 'em to clean up or she'd not teach 'em nothin', 'cos Smart'n'Civ'lize ain't nothin' to do with the color o' the skin, nay

Now one evenin' on our v'randa, Meronym was questionin' 'bout icons. *Is icons a home for the soul? Or a common mem'ry o' faces n'kin'n'age'n'all? Or a prayer to Sonmi? Or a tombstone wrote in this-life with messages for next-life?* See it was always whys'n'whats with Prescients, it weren't never 'nuff sumthin' just *was* an' leave it be. Duophysite was the same here on Maui, nay? Unc' Bees was tryin' to answer but foggin' out, he 'fessed he knowed 'zactly what icons is until the beat he'd to explain 'em. The Icon'ry Aunt Bees said, held Valleysmen's past an' present all t'gether. Now it didn't often happ'n I could read anyun's thinkin's, but that beat I seen the Shipwoman wond'rin', *Oho, then this Icon'ry I got to go visit it, yay*. Nay, I din't say nothin', but the f'llowin' sunup I strolled down to Bony Shore an' hid up on Soo-side Rock. See, I reck'ned if I could catch the offlander bein' dis-'spectful to our icons or better still cockaroachin' one, I could pit the older Valleysmen 'gainst her, an' so wise up my people'n'kin to the Prescient's truesome plannin's'n'all.

So I sat'n'waited on Sooside Rock, thinkin' o' the folks Georgie'd pushed off o' there into the gnashin' foamin' b'low. Windy mornin' it was, yay I mem'ry well, sand'n'dune grass whippin' an' blood-flower bushes threshin' an' surf flyin' off scuddin' breakers. I ate some fungusdo' what I'd bringed for brekker, but b'fore I'd finished who do I spy trompin' 'long to the Icon'ry but Meronym, yay, *an* Napes of Inouye. Clusterin'n'talkin' thick as thiefs! Oh, my thinkin' giddyupped now! Was Napes settin' himself up as the offlander's right arm? S'pose he was plannin' on replacin' Abbess as chief o' Nine Valleys once the Prescients'd run us all

over the Kohalas an' into the sea with their snaky judasin' Smart?
Now Napes'd got the charm he had, yay, ev'ryun loved him, his jokey yarnin's'n'smile'n'all. If I got the goat tongue, well, Napes'd sort o' got the people tongue. You can't go trustin' folks what lassoop words so skillsome as him. Into the Icon'ry Napes'n'Meronym went, bold as a pair o' cockadoodlies. The dog Py waited outside where Meronym told him.
Quiet as breezes I crept in after 'em. Napesd 'ready jammed the door open for seein'-light an' so it din't squeak none when I tip-pied in b'hind 'em. From the dim'n'shadowy shelfs what the oldest icons was kept on I heard Napes murmin'. Plans'n'conspiries, I jus' knowed it! I crept nearer to hear what I'd hear.
But Napes was braggin' 'bout his gran'pa's pa named Truman, yay the self-same Truman Third what still walks thru stories on Big I an' here on Maui too. Well, if you young uns don't know the story o' Truman Napes time you did, so sit still, be patient an' pass me the dammit weed.

Truman Napes was a scavver back when Old-Un gear was still junkifyin' in craters here'n'there. One mornin' an idea rooted in his mind what said the Old Uns may o' stashed presh gear up on Mauna Kea for safekeepin'. This idea growed'n'growed till by evenin' Truman'd settled to climb that scaresome mountain an' see what he'd see, yay, an' leave the very next day. His wife telled him, *You're crazy, there ain't nothin on Mauna Kea but Old Georgie an his temples hid in his 'closure walls. He'll not let you in unless you're ready died an your soul is his.* Truman jus' said, *Go to sleep, you crazy old bint, there ain't no truth in them crookit supe'stitions,* so he sleeps'n'wakes an' thru the crack o' dawn up Waipio Valley off he stomps.
Brave Truman trekked'n'climbed for three solid days an' had varyin' adventurin's what I ain't time to tell you now, but he s'vived 'em all till he was up that feary'n'ghostsome summit in the clouds what you can see from anywhere on Big I an' so high up he cudn't see the world b'low. Ashy it was, yay, no speck o' green an' a mil'yun winds tore here'n'there like rabies' dingos. Now Truman's steps was stopped by a wondersome ironstone wall, higher'n redwoods, what circled the hole peak for miles'n'miles. Truman walked daylong round it searchin' for a breach, 'cos there wasn't no scalin' it nor diggin' under, but guess what he finded in the hour b'fore dark? A man o' Hawi, yay, hooded tight 'gainst the wind, cross-leggin' behind a rock an' smokin' a pipe. The Hawi was a scavver too up on Mauna Kea for the selfsame reason o' Truman, can you b'lieve it? So lornsome was that place, Truman an' the man o' Hawi settled to team-up'n'divvy any gear what they finded t'gether, fifty-fifty
Well, Truman's luck changed the very next beat, yay. Them thick'nin' clouds got watery'n'thin an' that archin' steely gate in the 'closure wall shook free an' groaned thundersome an' budged open all o' itself. Thru that gate, Smart or magic Truman din't know, our hero spied a cluster o' eeriesome temples, jus' like the old yarns say there was, but Truman din't get feary nay, he got joocey thinkin' 'bout all the presh Old-Un gear'n'makin's what must be inside 'em. He slapped the Hawi Man's back, sayin', *Yo ho ho, we're richer'n kings'n'senators b'fore the Fall, Bro Hawi!* Tho' if Truman Napes was like his great-gran'son, he was prob'ly plottin' how to keep that scavved loot all for himself.
But that Hawi Man weren't smilesome, nay, he speaked grim from under his hood. *Bro Valleysman, my sleepin hour is come at last.*
Truman Napes din't und'stand. *It ain't sundown yet, what's your meanin? I ain't so sleepy so why are you now?*
But thru that mournsome gate the Hawi Man treaded. Truman was puzzlin' now, an' called out, *It ain't no time for sleepin, Bro Hawi! It's time for scavvin whoah presh gear o the Old Uns!*

Into that silent 'closure Truman followed his partner-scavver. Black'n'twisted rocks was lyin' ev'rywhere an' the sky it was black'n'busted. The Hawi Man sank to his knees, prayin'. Truman's heart was struck chillsome, see, a cold hand o' wind unhooded that kneelin' Hawi Man. Truman seen his partner was a long-died corpse, half skellyton'n'half maggoty meat, an' that cold hand o' wind was Old Georgie's hand, yay, the devil what was standin' there wavin' a crookit spoon. *Wasn't you achin'n lornsome outside, my presh,* speaked that king o' devils to the man o' Hawi, *wand'rin the lands o the livin with a stony soul an 'ready died? Why din't you obey my summ'nin sooner, you foolsome man?* Then Old Georgie sunk his crookit spoon thru the Hawi Man's sockets, yay, an' dug out the soul, drippin' in smeary brain, an' crunched it, yay, it cracked 'tween his horsey teeth. The man o' Hawi folded over an' was suddenwise jus' one more black'n'twisted rock litt'rin' the 'closure.
Old Georgie swallered the Hawi Man's soul, wiped his mouth, ass-belched, an' started hickin'. *Bar'b'rians' souls, delish an fine,* that devil rhymed, dancin' up to Truman, *walnuts pickled, sourest wine*. Truman cudn't move one limb, nay, so scarysome was that sight, see. *But Valleys' souls are pure'n'strong, an melt like honey on my tongue*. The devil's breath stunk fishy'n'farty *Fifty-fifty your deal,* it said. Old Georgie licked his own crookit'n'warty spoon. *D you want your half now, or when you're dead, Truman Napes Third o Mormon Valley?*
Well, now, Truman got his limbs back an' rabbited'n'ran'n'fell out o' the mournsome gate, an' slid down that screesome mountain for his life never lookin' b'hind him not once. When he got back to the Valleys, ev'ryun stared in 'mazement even b'fore he voiced his 'ventures.

Truman's hair'd been black as crows b'fore, but now it was whiter'n surf. Ev'ry single hair.

You'll mem'ry I, Zachry was curled in my hideynick in the Icon'ry list'nin' to Napes tellin' that mildewy yarn to my unwelcome dwellin'-guest an' showin' Meronym his fam'ly icons o' dead-lifes. He teached her their meanin's an' usin's for a fair few beats, then Napes said he'd got to go fix nets, an' off he went, leavin' Meronym 'lone. Now he'd not been gone hardly any time b'fore the Prescient called out in the dark, *So what d'you reck'n 'bout Truman, Zachry?* Oh, I'd got the shock, I din't dream she knowed I was there eavesdroppin'! But she faked her voice like weren't her plan to 'barrass nor shame me, nay, she faked her voice like we'd both gone into the Icon'ry t'gether. *D'you reck'n Truman's jus' an old woman's stoopit yarner? Or d'you reck'n it's got some true in it?*
No point me fakin' I weren't there neither, nay, 'cos she knowed I was there, no frettin'. Up I stood an' walked thru the shelfs to where the Prescient sat sketchin' the icon. My eyes'd got owlier in the dim, an' I could see Meronym's face prop'ly now. *This place it's got the holy o holies,* I telled her. *This is Sonmi's dwellin you're in*. My voiced got my strongest say-so, tho' my eavesdroppin' made it weaker. *No offlander's got no bis'ness trespyin thru our icons*.
Meronym was politesome as I weren't. *I asked Abbess's p'mission to enter. She say-soed I could. I ain't touchin no icon but Napes's fam'ly's. He say-soed I could. Please s'plain why you're frettin so, Zachry I want to und'stand but I can't.*
See? That dammit Prescient thinked o' your attacks b'fore you thinked of 'em yourself! *You may be stoopitin our Abbess,* I telled her, coolsome'n'mean now, *an you may be stoopitin Ma'n'my fam'ly an the hole dammit Nine Valleys, but you ain't stoopitin me nay not for one beat! I* know it *you ain't sayin the hole true!* Now I'd s'prised her for once, an' a pleasin' feelin' it was to stop my skulkin' an' show my thinkin's to the open day
Meronym sort o' frowned. *I ain't sayin the hole true 'bout what?* Yay I'd got Queen Smart cornered proper.
'Bout why you're here sussin our lands! Sussin our ways! Sussin us!
Meronym sighed an' put Napes's icon back in its shelf. *What matters here ain't part true or*

hole true, Zachry, but harm or not harmin, yay. What she said next was a spiker thru *my guts*. *Ain't you yourself got a secret what you're hidin this "hole true" to ev'ryun, Zachry?*
My thinkin' went blurry. How could she know 'bout Sloosha's Crossin'? That was years ago! Was Prescients workin' with the Kona? Did they have some Smart what dug deep'n'dark lookin' for buried shames in minds? I din't say nothin'.
I swear it, Zachry, she said, *I vow on Sonmi—*
Oh, I shouted at her, offlanders'n'savages don't even *b'lief* in Sonmi, so she'd got no bis'ness dirtyin' Sonmi's name with her tongue!
Meronym speaked calm'n'quietsome like always. I was way wrong, she said, she b'liefed in Sonmi, yay, even more'n I did, but if I pr'ferred it she'd lay her vowin' on her son, Anafi. On his luck'n'life, she vowed, no Prescient planned no harm to any Valleysman, nor ever, an' Prescients r'spected my tribe way way *way* more'n I knowed. She vowed when she could tell me the hole true she'd do it.
An' she left, takin' her vic'try with her.
I stayed a whiles an' visited Pa's icon, an' seein' his face carved in the grain I seen his face lyin' in Waipio River. Oh, hot tears o' shame'n'sorryin' brimmed out. Head o' Bailey's Dwellin' I was s'posed to be, but I'd got no stronger say-so'n a frighty lambkin an' no springier wit'n a coney in a trap.

Bring me ev'dence, Valleysman, Abbess'd said, *or hold your counsel,* so now I thinked ev'ry moment how to get my ev'dence, an' if I cudn't get grasp of it honor'bly well, so-be-it, I'd have to sneak my ev'dence. A bunch o' days later my fam'ly was over at Aunt Bees's, with Meronym, 'cos she was learnin' honeyin'. I came back from herdin' early, yay with the sun still 'bove the Kohalas, an' I crept into our vis'tor's room an' searched for her gearbag. Din't take long, the Shipwoman'd stowed it under the plankin'. Inside was littl' gifts like what she'd gived us when she first come, but some Smart gear too. Sev'ral boxes what din't rattley but'd got no lid neither so I cudn't open 'em, an eerie tool what I din't know shaped'n'smooth as a goat's shinbone but gray'n'heavy like lava-stone, two pairs o' well-crafted boots, three–four books o' sketchin's'n'writin's in secret Prescient tongue. I don't know where them sketchin's was drawn, but it weren't on Big Isle, nay, there was plants'n'birds what I'd not even seen in dreamin's, nay Last was most wondersome.
One big silv'ry egg it was, sized a babbit's head, with dents'n'markin's on it what fingers rested in. Its fat weight was eerie an' it wouldn't roll. I know that don't sound senseful, but yarns 'bout Old-Un Smart an' flyin' dwellin's an' growin' babbits in bottles an' pictures zoomin' cross the Hole World ain't senseful neither but that's how it was, so storymen an' old books tell it. So I cupped that silv'ry egg in my own hands, an' it started purrin' an' glowin' some, yay, like it was livin'. Quicksharp I let go the egg, an' it died dull. Was my hands' warmness makin' it stir?
So hungrysome was my curio, I held it again, an' the egg vibed warm till a ghost-girl flickered'n'appeared there! Yay, a ghost-girl, right 'bove the egg, as truesome as I'm sittin' here, her head'n'neck was jus' floatin' there, like 'flection in moon-water, an' she was *talkin'*!
Now I got scared an' took my hands off the sil'vry egg, but the ghost-girl stayed, yay
What did she do? Nothin' but talk'n'talk, like I am to you. But not a norm'ly storyman she weren't, nay, she was talkin' in Old-Un tongue, an' not p'formin' none, jus' answerin' questions what a man's hushly voice asked, tho' he never showed his face. For ev'ry word I und'standed 'bout five–six followed what I din't. The ghost-girl's lips was fixed in a bitter smile, but her creamy eyes was sad so sad but proud'n'strong too. When I got 'nuff spunk I speaked up, I murmed, *Sis, are you a lost soul?* Ignored me she did, so I asked, *Sis, can you*

see me? Fin'ly I cogged the ghost-girl weren't talkin' to me an' cudn't see me.
I tried strokin' her cloudy skin'n'bristly hair but, I vow it, my fingers passed right thru, yay, jus' like a water 'flection. Papery moths blowed thru her shimm'rin' eyes'n'mouth too, to'n'fro, yay, to'n'fro.
Oh, eerie'n'so beautsome'n'blue she was, my soul was achin'.
Suddenwise the ghost-girl vanished back into that egg an' a man took her place. A ghost-Prescient he was, this un *could* see me an' fiercesome he speaked at me. *Who are you, boy, an where is Meronym?*
The Prescient leant nearer an' his face growed. Growly'n'fangy his voice was. *I asked you two questions, boy, answer em* now *or I'll cuss your fam'ly so diresome no babbit'll live past one moon old now nor never!*
I sweated'n'gulped dry. *Zachry, sir,* I said, *an Meronym's howzittin fine, yay, she's at Aunt Bees's learnin honeyin.*
The Prescient shootered my soul with his eyes, yay, settlin' whether or nay to b'lief me. *An does Meronym know her host sivvies his guest's gear when she's out? Answer truesome now 'cos I can tell a liar.*
I was flinchin' for pain as I shaked my head.
List'n close. That man had as much say-so as any Abbess. *You'll put this orison, this "egg" you're holdin now, back where you finded it. You'll tell* no un *but* no un *'bout it. Or else d'you know what I'll do?*
Yay, answered I. *Cuss my fam'ly so diresome no babbit'll ever live.*
Yay, you cogged it, answered that thund'ry man. *I'll be watchin, Zachry o Bailey's Dwellin,* that ghost-Prescient speaked, see he even knowed my dwellin' like Old Georgie. He vanished, an' the silv'ry egg simmered quiet then died. Quicksharp I packed Meronym's b'longin's in her gearbag an' stowed it back under the plankin', wishin' I'd never gone nosyin'. See, what I'd found weren't ev'dence for my doubtin's to show Abbess, nay, what I'd finded was a Smart cuss on my stoned luck an', I 'fessed it to me myself, a grimy smear on my honor as a host.
But I cudn't forget that ghost-girl neither, nay, she haunted my dreams wakin'n'sleepin'. So many feelin's I'd got I din't have room 'nuff for 'em. Oh, bein' young ain't easy 'cos ev'rythin' you're puzzlin'n'anxin' you're puzzlin'n'anxin' it for the first time.

Lady Moon growed fat, Lady Moon growed thin, an' suddenwise three o' the six moons b'fore the Prescient Ship was due back for Meronym'd 'ready gone by. A sort o' truce was laid b'tween me'n'our guest now. I din't trust the Shipwoman but I tol'rated her 'round my dwellin' politesome 'nuff so I could spy her better. Then one squally aft'noon the first o' sev'ral happ'nin's fell, yay happ'nin's what changed that truce into sumthin' where her fate'n'mine was binded t'gether like twines o' vine-cord.
One rainy mornin' Bro Munro's littlest F'kugly came screein' upgulch to find me huddlin' 'neath 'brella leaves on Ranch Rise, fetchin' direst news to me he was. My sis Catkin'd been line-fishin' on Dog Rock Shore an'd trod on a scorpion fish an' now she was dyin' o' shakes'n'heats at Munro's Dwellin'. The herb'list, Wimoway yay, Roses's ma, was tendin' her, an' Leary the Hilo healer was doin' his inchanties too, but Catkin's life was fadin', yay Strappin' mus-clers don't usually s'vive a scorpion fish, nay, an' poor littl' Catkin was dyin'n'd got two hours maybe three.
F'kugly mindered the goats an' I slid down thru the dogwood trees to Munro's Dwellin' an', yay, there it was jus' like F'kugly'd said it. Catkin was burnin' an' breathin' chokely an' she din't know no un's face. Wimoway'd tweezed out the poison fins an' bathed the stingin' in

noni pulp an' Sussy was pressin' cool sops to calm her head. Jonas was gone prayin' to Sonmi at the Icon'ry. Beardy Leary was mumblin' his Hilo spells an' shakin' his magic tufty spikers to drive off evil spirits. Din't seem Leary was helpin' much, nay Catkin was dyin', the air smelled of it, but Ma wanted Leary there, see you'll b'lief in a mil'yun diff'rent b'liefin's if you reck'n jus' *one* of 'em may aid you. So what could I do, 'cept sit there an' hold b'loved Catkin's burnin' hands an' mem'ry my stock-still useless self watchin' Kona bullwhippin'n'circlin' Pa'n'Adam? Now maybe the voice was Pa's or maybe Sonmi's or maybe no un's but mine, but a hushly voice popped a bubble jus' inside my ear: *Meronym,* it said.

Yibber telled me Meronym was up Gusjaw's Gulch, so there I ran an', yay there she was fillin' littl' Smart jars o' water up Gusjaw's Gulch in the steamin' rain, see Wolt'd passed by her earlier'n telled the yibber. The Prescient'd got her spesh gearbag with her an' I thanked Sonmi for that. *Good aft'noon,* called the Shipwoman when she seen me splashin' upstream. *No, it ain't,* I shouted back. *Catkin's dyin!* Meronym list'ned grief-some 'nuff as I telled her 'bout the scorpion fish, but she sorried, nay, she din't have no healin' Smart an' anyway Wimoway's her-b'lin's an' Leary's 'cantations was Big Isle healin' an' that was best for Big Isle sick folks, wasn't it, nay?

Dingo shit, said I.

She shaked her head so sadsome.

Slywise I speaked now, *Catkin calls you Auntie an* she *b'liefs you're kin. You surefire b'have in our dwellin like you're kin. Is that jus' nother fake for you to study us some more? 'Nother part o your "not the hole true"?*

Meronym flinched. *No, Zachry, it ain't.*

Well, then, I gambled some luck, *I say you got spesh Smart what'll help your kin.*

Meronym threw a spiker in her words. *Why don't you sivvy thru my gear again an thief my spesh Prescient Smart yourself?*

Yay, she knowed 'bout me'n'the silv'ry egg. She'd been fakin' she din't but she knowed. No point naysayin', so I din't. *My sis is dyin while we're standin here knucklyin.*

So much rivers'n'rain in the world it flowed by us. Fin'ly Meronym said yay, she'd come'n'see Catkin, but scorpion fish poison was quick'n'thick an' she prob'ly cudn't do nothin' to save my littl' sis an' I'd best und'stand that truth now. I din't say yay nor nay I jus' leaded her quicksharp down to Munro's Dwellin'. When the Prescient walked in, Wimoway 'splained what she'd done tho' Beardy Leary said, *Ooo … a devil's drawn near … ooo, I sense her with my spesh powers …*

Catkin'd gone under now, yay, she lay still'n'stiff as an icon, jus' a whispin'-breathin' scratched in her throat. Meronym's griefsome face jus' said, *Nay, she's too far gone I can't do nothin,* an' she kissed my sis's forehead g'bye, walked back sadsome into the rain. *Oh, see the Prescient,* Leary crowed, *their Smart can move magicky ships o steel but only the Holy Chant o Angel Laz'rus can tempt back the girl's soul from them despairin marshes b'tween life'n'death.* Despair I felt, my sis was dyin', rain was drummin', but that same voice din't shut up in my ear. *Meronym.*

I din't know why but I followed her out. Shelt'rin' in Munro's pott'ry doorway she was starin' at the rods o' rain. *I ain't got no right to ask you for favors, I ain't been a good host, nay I been a pisspoor bad un, but … I'd* ran out o' words.

The Prescient din't move nor look at me, nay. *The life o' your tribe's got a nat'ral order. Catkin'd o treaded on that scorpion fish if I'd been here or not.*

Rainbirds spilt their galoshin'-galishin' song. *I'm jus' a stoopit goat herder, but I reck'n jus by bein here you're bustin this nat'ral order. I reck'n you're killin Catkin by not actin. An I reck'n if it was your son, Anafi, lyin there with scorpion fish poison meltin his heart'n'lungs, this*

nat'ral order d not be so important to you, yay?
She din't answer, but I knowed she was list'nin'.
Why's a Prescient's life worth more'n Valleysman's?
She lost her calm. *I ain't here to play Lady Sonmi ev'ry time sumthin bad happ'ns an click my fingers'n make it right! I'm jus' human, Zachry, like you, like anyun!*
I promised, *It won't be ev'ry time sumthin bad happens, it's jus' now.*
Tears was in her eyes. *That ain't no promise you can keep or break.*
Sudd'nwise I finded myself tellin' her ev'ry flea o' true 'bout Sloosha's Crossin', yay, ev'rythin'. How I'd leaded the Kona to kill Pa an' slave Adam an'd never 'fessed to no un till that very beat. I din't know why I was spillin' this corked secret to my enemy not till the very end, when I cogged its meanin' an' telled her too. *What I jus' teached you 'bout me'n'my soul is a spiker gainst my throat an a gag over my mouth. You can tell Old Ma Yibber what I telled you, an ruin me, any time you want. She'll b'lief you an so she should 'cos it's true ev'ry word an' folks'll b'lief you 'cos they sense my soul is stoned. Now if you got any Smart, yay,* anythin' *what may help Catkin now, give it me, tell it me, do it. No un'll ever,* ever *know, nay, I vow it, jus' you an me.*
Meronym placed her hands on her head like it boomed up with woe an' she mumbed to herself sumthin' like *If my pres'dent ever finded out, my hole faculty'd be disbandied,* yay times was she used hole flocks o' words what I din't know. From a lidless jar in her gearbag she got out a tiny small-as-an-ant-egg turquoise stone an' telled me to sneak it into Catkin's mouth so slywise no un seen, nay, nor even *thinked* they seen. *An for Sonmi's sake,* Meronym warned me, *if Catkin lives, an I ain't promisin she will, make sure the herb'list gets the hooray-hooray for healin her, not that voodoo snake-oilster from Hilo, yay?*
So I took that turquoise med'sun an' thanked her jus' once. Meronym said, *Don't mention no words, not now an never while I'm livin,* an' that promise I kept tight. Into my presh sis's mouth I dropped it as I changed her sop-cloth, like Meronym'd telled me, so no un saw nothin'. An' what happ'ned?
Three days later Catkin was back learnin' in the school'ry yay
Three days! Well, I stopped lookin' for ev'dence that Prescients was spyin' to slave us. Leary from Hilo crowed to the toads on the roads an' the hole wide world, no healer was greater'n he, not even the Prescients, tho' folks mostly b'liefed Wimoway'd done it, yay, not him.

Coneys'n'roasted taro we was eatin' one supper 'bout a moon after Catkin's sick when Meronym made a s'prisin' 'nouncement. She meant to climb up Mauna Kea b'fore the Ship returned, she said, for to see what she'd see. Ma speaked first, 'ready worrysome. *What for, Sis Meronym? Ain't nothin' up Mauna Kea but never-endin winter an a big heap o rocks.*
Now Ma'd not said what we was all thinkin' 'cos she din't want to look barb'ric'n'savage, but Sussy din't hold back none. *Aunt Mero, if you go up there Old Georgie'll freeze you an dig out your soul with a cruel n'crookit spoony an eat it so you'll never even be reborned an your body'll be turned into a frostbited boulder. You want to stay here in the Valleys, where it's safe.*
Meronym din't mick Sussy none, she jus' said Prescients'd got Smart what'd ward Old Georgie away. Climbin' Mauna Kea was ne'ssary to map Windward, she said, an' anyhow, Valleysmen needed more lowdown on Kona movements over Leeward'n'Waimea Town. Now time was, such words'd o' roused my s'picions buzzin', but I din't think that now, nay, tho' I was diresome worried for our guest. Well, the yibber was busy for days when this news jumped out. *The Shipwoman's climbin Mauna Kea!* Folks dropped by warnin' Meronym not to go pokin' her nose into OG's 'closure or she'd never come back down. Even Napes visited,

sayin' climbin' Mauna Kea in a story was one thing, doin' it for real was cracked'n'crazed. Abbess said Meronym could come'n'go where she pleased, but she'd not say-so no un to guide Meronym up, jus' too unknowed'n'risky that summit was, three days up'n'three more down, an' dingos'n'Kona'n'Sonmi knows what on the way, an' anyhow prep'ration for the Honokaa barterin' was needin' all hands in the dwellin's.
Now I s'prised ev'ryun, yay me too, when I settled to go with her. I weren't known as the bravest-balled bullock in the barn. So why'd I done it? Simple 'nuff. One, I owed Meronym for Catkin. Two, my soul was 'ready half stoned, yay, surefire I'd not get re-birthed, so what'd I got to lose? Better if Old Georgie ate my soul'n someun else's who'd get rebirthed else, yay? That ain't brave, nay it's jus' sense. Ma din't act pleased, a busy 'nuff time in the Valleys 'cos o' harvest comin'n'all, but come the dawn Meronym'n'me set off she gived me journey-grinds what she'd smoked'n'brined an' said Pa'd o' prouded to see me so growed'n'gutsy Jonas gived me a spesh sharp'n'fine rockfish spiker, an' Sussy gived amulets o' pearl-shell to dazzle'n'blind Georgie's eye if he chased us. Kobbery my cuz was over to minder my goats, he gived a bag o' raisins from his fam'ly's vines. Catkin was last, she gived me a kiss an'

Meronym too, an' made us both promise we'd be back in six days.

Eastly o' Sloosha's we din't climb the Kuikuihaele Track, nay, we trekked inland southly up Waiulili Stream, an' I cogged the clearin' by Hiilawe Falls where I'd s'prised the Kona what killed Pa five–six years b'fore. Overgrown now it was, jus' traces o' bygone campfires scorchin' the middle. In Hiilawe Pool's shallows I spikered a couple o' rockfish with Jonas's gift, to last out our grinds. Rain fell so the Waiulili Stream gushed too fierce for footin', so we bushwhacked up thru sugarcane, yay a hard half day's goin' it was till we cleared the Kohala Ridge; the windy open made us gasp an' thru riftin' clouds we seen Mauna Kea higher'n the sky, yay Now I seen Mauna Kea from Honokaa b'fore, o' course, but a mountain you're plannin' on climbin' ain't the same as the one you ain't. It ain't so pretty nay Hush 'nuff an' you'll *hear* it. The cane thinned to tind'ry pines an' we got to Old Uns' Waimea Way Sev'ral miles 'long this ancient'n'cracked road we clopped till we met a fur trapper an' his laughin' doggy restin' by a slopin' pond. Old Yanagi was his name an' he'd got mukelung so bad by'n'by Young Yanagi'd be takin' over the fam'ly bis'ness, I thinked. We said we was herb'lists sivvyin' for presh plants an' maybe Yanagi b'liefed us an' maybe he din't, but he bartered us fungusdo' for rockfish an' warned us Waimea Town weren't so friendsome as it'd been once, nay, Kona say-soed'n'knucklied ficklewise an' you cudn't guess their b'havin's.
A mile or so eastly o' Waimea Town we heard shod hoofs clop-pin' an' we dived off the track in the nick b'fore three Kona fighters on black stal'yons an' their horse boy on a pony galloped by Hate'n'fear quaked me an' I wanted to kill 'em like prawns on a skewer, but slower'n that. The boy I thought may o' been Adam, but I always thinked that 'bout young Kona, they was wearin' helms so I cudn't see too sure, nay. We din't speak much from then 'cos speakin' can be heard by spyers what you can't spy. Southly thru shrubby heath we tromped now till we got to wideway. Wideway I'd heard o' from storymen an' here it was, an open, long, flat o' roadstone. Saplin's'n'bush was musclin' up, but wondersome'n'wild was that windy space. Meronym said it was named Air Port in Old Uns' tongue, where their flyin' boatsd anchor down, yay like wild geese on the Pololu Marshes. We din't cross wideway, nay, we skirted it, there wasn't no cover see.
By sundown we tented up in a cactusy hollow, an' when it was dark 'nuff I lit us a fire. Lornsome I felt to be away from my Valleys'n'kin, but in that no-man's-land Meronym's mask was slip-pin' an' I was seein' her more clear'n I'd ever done b'fore. I asked her straight, *What's it like, the Hole World, the offlands over the ocean?*

Her mask'd not slipped right off tho'. *What d'you reck'n?*

So I telled her my 'maginin's o' places from old books'n'pics in the school'ry. Lands where the Fall'd never falled, towns bigger'n all o' Big I, an' towers o' stars'n'suns blazin' higher'n Mauna Kea, bays of not jus' one Prescient Ship but a mil'yun, Smart boxes what make delish grinds more'n anyun can eat, Smart pipes what gush more brew'n anyun can drink, places where it's always spring an' no sick, no knucklyin' an' no slavin'. Places where ev'ryun's a beaut-some purebirth who lives to be one hun'erd'n'fifty years.

Meronym pulled her blanky tighter. *My parents an their gen'ration b'liefed, somewhere, hole cities o Old Uns s'vived the Fall b'yonder the oceans, jus' like you, Zachry Old-time names haunted their maginin's … Melbun, Orkland, Jo'burg, Buenas Yerbs, Mumbay, Sing'pore.* The Shipwoman was teachin' me what no Valleysman'd ever heard, an' I list'ned tight'n'wordless. *Fin'ly five decades after my people's landin at Prescience, we relaunched the Ship what bringed us there.* Dingos howled in the far-far 'bout folks soon to die, I prayed Sonmi it weren't us. *They finded the cities where the old maps promised, dead-rubble cities, jungle-choked cities, plague-rotted cities, but never a sign o them livin cities o their yearnin's. We Prescients din't b'lief our weak flame o Civ'lize was now the brightest in the Hole World, an further an further we sailed year by year, but we din't find no flame brighter. So lornsome we felt. Such a presh burden for two thousand pairs o hands! I vow it, there ain't more'n sev'ral places in Hole World what got the Smart o the Nine Valleys.*

Anxin'n'proudful at one time hearin' them words made me, like a pa, an' like she an' me

weren't so diff 'rent as a god an' a worshiper, nay

Second day fluffsome clouds rabbited westly an' that snaky leeward sun was hissin' loud'n'hot. We drank like whales from icy'n'sooty brooks. Higher to cooler air we climbed till no mozzie pricked us no more. Stunty'n'dry woods was crossed by swathes o' black'n'ra-zory lava spitted'n'spewed by Mauna Kea. Snailysome goin' was them rockfields, yay jus' brush that rock light an' your fingers'd bleed fast'n'wetly so I binded my boots'n'hands in strips o' hide-bark an' did the same for Meronym. Blisters scabbed her foots, her soles'd not got my goat tuff see, but that woman weren't no moaner, nay, whatever else she was. We tented up in a forest o' needles'n'thorns an' a waxy mist hid our campfire but it hid any sneaker-uppers too an' I got nervy Our bodies was busted by tiredness but our minds wasn't sleepy yet so we talked some while eatin'. *You really ain't feary,* said I, jerkin' my thumb upwards, *o meetin Georgie when we get to the summit, like Truman Napes did?*

Meronym said the weather was way more scaresome to her.

I spoke my mind: *You don't b'lief he's real, do you?*

Meronym said Old Georgie weren't real for her, nay, but he could still be real for me.

Then who, asked I, *tripped the Fall if it weren't Old Georgie?*

Eerie birds I din't knowed yibbered news in the dark for a beat or two. The Prescient answered, *Old Uns tripped their own Fall.*

Oh, her words was a rope o' smoke. *But Old Uns'd got the Smart!*

I mem'ry she answered, *Yay, Old Uns' Smart mastered sicks, miles, seeds an made miracles ord'nary, but it din't master one thing, nay, a hunger in the hearts o humans, yay, a hunger for more.*

More what? I asked. *Old Uns'd got ev'rythin.*

Oh, more gear, more food, faster speeds, longer lifes, easier lifes, more power, *yay. Now the Hole World is big, but it weren't big nuff for that hunger what made Old Uns rip out the skies an boil up the seas an poison soil with crazed atoms an donkey 'bout with rotted seeds so new plagues was borned an babbits was freakbirthed. Fin'ly, bit'ly, then quicksharp, states busted

into bar'bric tribes an the Civ'lize Days ended, 'cept for a few folds'n'pockets here'n'there, where its last embers glimmer.
I asked why Meronym'd never spoke this yarnin' in the Valleys.
Valleysmen'd not want to hear, she answered, *that human hunger birthed the Civ'lize, but human hunger killed it too. I know it from other tribes offland what I stayed with. Times are you say a person's b'liefs ain't true, they think you're sayin their lifes ain't true an their truth ain't true.*

Yay she was prob'ly right.

Third day out was clear'n'blue, but Meronym's legs was jellyfishin' so I lugged ev'rythin' on my back 'cept for her gearbag. Wed trekked over the mountain's shoulder to the southly face, where the scars of an Old-Un track zigzaggered summitwards. Around noon Meronym rested while I gathered 'nuff firewood for two faggots 'cos we was in the last trees now. Lookin' down t'ward Mauna Loa, we squinted a troop o' horses on Saddle Road, their Kona metal spicklin' in sunlight. So high up we was, their horses was jus' termite-size. I wished I could o' crushed them savages b'tween my finger'n'thumb an' wiped the slime off on my pants. I prayed Sonmi no Kona ever turned up this Summit Track 'cos fine places there was for an' ambushin' an' Meronym'n'me cudn't knuckly hard nor long I reck'ned. I din't see no hoofprints nor tentin' marks anyhow.
The trees ended an' the wind got musclier'n'angrier, bringin' not a sniff o' smoke, no farmin', no dung, no nothin' 'cept fine, fine dust. Birds was rarer too in them sheer'n'scrubby slopes, jus' buzzards surfin' high. By evenin' we got to a cluster of Old-Un buildings what Meronym said'd been a village for 'stron'mers what was priests o' the Smart what read the stars. This village'd not been lived in since the Fall an' no more des'late place I'd ever seen. No water nor soil an' the night fell, oh, fangy'n'cold, so we dressed thick an' lit a fire in an empty dwellin'. Flamelights danced with shadows round them unloved walls. I was anxin' 'bout the summit next day, so in part to blind my mind, I asked Meronym if Abbess spoke true when she said the Hole World flies round the sun, or if the Men o' Hilo was true sayin' the sun flies round the Hole World.
Abbess is quite correct, answered Meronym.
Then the true true is diff'rent to the seemin true? said I.
Yay, an it usually is, I mem'ry Meronym sayin', *an that's why true true is presher'n'rarer'n diamonds*. By'n'by sleep hooded her, but my thinkin's kept me awake till a silent woman came an' sat by the fire, sneez-in'n'shiv'rin' hushly Her neckless o' cowrie shells said she was a Honomu fisher, an' if she'd o' been living she'd o' been joocesome no frettin'. Into the fire the woman uncurled her fingers, into the prettiest bronze'n'ruby petals, but she jus' sighed lornsomer'n a bird in a box in a well, see, them flames cudn't heat her up none. She'd got pebbles 'stead o' eyeballs an' I wondered if she was climbin' Mauna Kea to let Old Georgie fin'ly put her soul to stony sleep. Dead folk hear livin's thinkin's, an' that drowned fisher gazed at me with them pebbles, noddin' yay an' she took out a pipe for comfort but I din't ask for no skank Long beats later I waked, the fire was dyin' an' the stoned Honomu'd taked her leave. No tracks that un left in the dust, but I smelt the smoke from her pipe for a beat or two.
See, I thinked, *Meronym knows a lot 'bout Smart an life but Val-leysmen know more 'bout death.*

Fourth dawn was a wind not o' this world, nay, it warped that brutal'n'ringin' light an' hooped the horizon an' ripped words out o' your mouth an' your body's warmness thru your tarp'n'furs. Summit trail from the 'stron'mers' village was busted'n'roded diresome, yay, great

mouthfuls landslipped away an' no leafs nor roots nor mosses even jus' dry'n'freezed dust'n'grit what scratched our eyes like a crazed woman. Our Valleys boots was shredded by now, so Meronym gived us both a pair o' Smart Prescient boots made o' I din't know what but whoah warm'n'soft'n'tuff they was so we could go on. Four–five miles later the ground flatted out so you din't feel you was on a mountain no more, nay, more like an ant on a table, jus' a flatness hangin' in nothin' b'tween worlds. Fin'ly near noon we rounded a bend an' I gasped shocksome 'cos here was the 'closure, jus' like Truman'd said it, tho' its walls wasn't as tall as a redwood, nay, more a spruce high. The track leaded straight to the steely gate, yay but its unbusted walls weren't so endless long, nay you could o' walked round it in a quarter of a mornin'. Now inside the 'closure on rising ground was the bowls o' temples, yay, the eeriest Old-Un buildings in Ha-Why or Hole World, who knows? How could we get to 'em tho'? Meronym stroked that awesome gate an' muttered, *We'd need a dammit diresome flashbang to get these off their hinges, yay*. Out o' her gearbag tho' she got not a flashbang, nay, but a Smart rope, like the Prescients bartered sumtimes, fine'n'light. Two stumps stuck up 'bove the steely gate, an' she tried to lassoop one. The wind was craftier'n her aim, but I tried next an'

lassooped it first time, an' up Old Georgie's 'closure we scaled hand by hand by hand.

Inside that dreadsome place at the world's top, yay, the wind hushed like a hurrycane's clear eye. The sun was deaf'nin' so high up, yay, it roared an' time streamed from it. No paths there wasn't inside the 'closure just a mil'yun boulders like in Truman Napes's yarn, the bodies o' the stoned'n'unsouled they was, an' I wondered if Meronym or me or both'd be boulders by nightfall. Ten–twelve temples waited here'n'there, white'n'silv'ry an' gold'n'bronze with squat bodies'n'round crowns an' mostly windowless. The nearest un was jus' a hun'erd paces away, an' we set off for it first. I asked if this was where Old Uns worshiped their Smart.
Meronym spoke, marv'lin' as much as me, they wasn't temples, nay, but *observ'trees* what Old Uns used to study the planets'n' moon'n'stars, an' the space b'tween, to und'stand where ev'rythin' begins an' where ev'rythin' ends. We stepped caref'ly b'tween them twisted rocks. Round one I seen crushed cowrie shells from Hon-omu way, an' I knowed it was my visitor the night b'fore. The wind bringed my gran'pa's voice whispin' from the far-far … *Judas*. Eerie, yay, but shockin', nay, 'cos ev'rythin' in that place was eerie … *Judas*. I din't tell Meronym.

How she got that observ'tree door open, I ain't knowin' so don't mozzie me. A sort of umb'licky cord b'tween the door's dusted 'n'rusty niche an' her orison-egg worked in a beat or two. Now I was busy guardin' us from the dwellers o' that 'closure. My gran'pa's whispin's was now cussin' half faces what dis'peared when you stared straight. A sharp hiss as the observ'tree door cracked open. Air guffed out stale'n'sour like it was breathed b'fore the Fall an', yay so it prob'ly was. In we stepped an' what did we find?
Describin' such Smart ain't easy Gear there was what we ain't mem'ried on Ha-Why so its names ain't mem'ried neither, yay, almost nothin' in there could I cogg. Shimm'rin' floors, white walls 'n'roofs, one great chamber, round'n'sunk, filled by a mighty tube wider'n a man an' longer'n five what Meronym named a *radyo tel'scope* what was, she said, the furthest-seein' eye Old Uns ever made. Ev'rythin' white'n'pure as Sonmi's robes, yay, not one flea o' dirt 'cept what we tromped in. Tables'n'chairs sat round waitin' for sitters on balconies made

o' steel so our foots gonged. Even the Ship-woman was smacked wondersome by all this perfect Smart. She showed her orison ev'rythin' we seed. The orison glowed'n'purred an' windows came'n'went. *It's mem'ryin the place,* 'splained Meronym, tho' I din't und'stand so good an' I asked what that Smart egg was true-be-telled.

Meronym rested a beat an' drank a mouth o' brew from her flask. *An orison is a brain an a window an it's a mem'ry. Its brain lets you do things like unlock observ'tree doors what you jus' seen. Its window lets you speak to other orisons in the far-far Its mem'ry lets you see what orisons in the past seen'n heard, an keep what my orison sees'n hears safe from fgettin.*

Shamed to mem'ry Meronym o' my sivvyin' I was, yay, but if I din't ask then I may not o' got the chance ever, so I asked it, *The shimm'rin'n'beautsome girl what I seen in this … orison b'fore … was she a mem'ry or a window?*

Meronym hes'tated. *Mem'ry.*

I asked if the girl was livin' still.

Nay, answered Meronym.

I asked, was she a Prescient?

She hes'tated, an' said she wanted to tell me a hole true now, but that other Valleysmend not be ready for its hearin'. I vowed on Pa's icon to say nothin', nay, to no un. *Very well. She was Sonmi, Zachry. Sonmi the freakbirthed human what your ancestors b'liefed was your god.*

Sonmi was a human like you'n'me? I'd never thinked so nor'd Abbess ever speaked such loonsomeness, nay. Sonmi'd been birthed by a god o' Smart named Darwin, that's what we b'liefed. Did Meronym b'lief this Sonmi'd lived on Prescience I or on Big I?

She was borned'n'died hun'erds o years ago 'cross the ocean west-nor'westly, so Meronym speaked, *on a pen'sula all deadlanded now but its old-time name was Nea So Copros an its ancient one Korea. A short'njudased life Sonmi had, an only after she'd died did she find say-so over purebloods'nfreakbirths' thinkin's.*

All this shockin' newness buzzed'n'busted my brain an' I din't know what to b'lief. I asked what Sonmi's mem'ry was doin' in Meronym's orison hun'erds o' years after.

Now I seen Meronym was sorryin' she'd beginned, yay *Sonmi was killed by Old-Un chiefs what feared her, but b'fore she died she spoke to an orison 'bout her acts'n'deedin's. I'd got her mem'ry in my orison 'cos I was studyin her brief life, to und'stand you Valleysmen better.*

That's why that girl'd haunted me so. *I seen a sort o' Smart ghost?*

Meronym yayed. *Zachry, we got many buildin's to visit b'fore nigh fall.*

Now as we were crossin' the 'closure to the second observ'tree, the boulders began speakin'. *Oh, you was right 'bout the dammit Prescients first time, Bro Zachry! She's fuggin your b'liefs'n'all up'n'down'n'in'n'out!* I clamped my ears, but yay, them voices went thru these hands. *This woman only saved Catkin's life to cloudy your thinkin with debt'n'honor!* Crampsome was them stones' shapes'n'words. I clamped my jaw shut to stop me an-swerin'. *She's scavvin'n'sivvyin Big Isle Smart what truesome b'longs to Valleys-men!* Grit devils got under my eyelids. *Your pa'd not let no lyin offlander worm into* his *trust, bro, nor use him as a pack mule!* Them words was so true I cudn't argue back none, an' I stumbled painsome. Meronym steadied me. I din't 'fess the boulders was yibberstinkin' her, but she seen sumthin' weren't right. *The air up here is thin'n'watery,* she speaked, *an your brain'll get diresome hungry an make this wyrd place wyrdsomer.*

We got to the second buildin' an' I slumped droozy while the Prescient worked the door open. Oh, that hollerin' sun hollowed my head. *She's a sly un, no frettin, Zachry!* Truman Napes Third was perched on his boulder. Meronym'd not even heard him. *You b'lief her or your own kin?* he called me, mournsome. *Are your truths jus' "thin'n'watery air"? Am I?* Oh, I was

reliefed the next beat when the observ'tree door open. Them ghosts'n'their spikery truths cudn't follow us inside, see, I s'pose the Smart kept 'em out.

So it went all aft'noon long, yay Most o' the observ trees was much like the first. The Prescient opened up, 'splored the place with her orison, an' mostly forgot I was there. Me, I just sat an' breathed that Smart air till she was done. But stompin' b'tween buildin's, twisted boulders chorused *me, Judas!* an' *Pack mule!* an' *Ship slave!* Ghosts o' Valleysmen pleaded me thru unpartin' frostbited lips, yay, *She ain't your tribe! Ain't even your color!* an' then'n'there, oh, frightsome sense they made, I 'fess it here'n'now

S'picion rotted me.

No Prescient'd ever been straight with no Valleysman, an' that day I knowed Meronym was no diff'rent. The boulders'd changed the blue sky to anxin'n'flinty gray by the last buildin'. Meronym teached me it weren't no observ'tree but a *gen'rator* what made a Smart magic named *'lectric* what worked the hole place like a heart works the body. She was whoahin' at the machines'n'all, but I was jus' feelin' stoopit'n'judased for bein' blinded by the Shipwoman since she'd come elbowin' into my dwellin'. I din't know what to do nor how to stop her plans, but Georgie'd got his plans, cuss him.

This gen'rator's innards was diff'rent from other buildin's. The Prescient woman glowed with fass'nation as we stepped into the echoey chambers, but I din't. See, I knowed we wasn't alone in there. Shipwoman din't b'lief me, o' course, but in the biggest space where a mighty iron heart stood silent was a sort o' throne s'rounded by tables o' littl' windows an' numbers'n'all, an' on this throne was a died Old-Un priest slumpin' under an arched window. The Prescient swallowed hard an' peered close. *A chief stron'mer, I reck'n,* she spoke hushly *he must o soosided here when the Fall came, an the sealed air's saved his body from rottin. A* priest-king not a chief, I reck'ned, in such a wondersome palace. She got to work mem'ryin' ev'ry inch o' that doomin' place on her orison while I 'proached nearer that priest-king from the world o' perfect Civ'lize. His hair straggled an' his nails was hooky an' the years'd shrunk'n'sagged his face some sure, but his Smart sky clothes was spiff'n'fine, sapphires pierced his ear, an' he mem'ried me of Unc' Bees, same hoggy nose, yay

List'n to me, Valleysman, the soosided priest-king spoke, *yay, list'n. We Old Uns was sick with Smart an the Fall was our cure. The Prescient don't know she's sick, but, oh, real sick she is.* Thru that arch o' glass waves o' snow was tossin'n'turnin' an' drownin' the sun. *Put her to sleep, Zachry, or she'n'her kind'll bring all their offland sick to your beautsome Valleys. I'll minder her soul well in this place, never fear.* The Shipwoman was movin' 'bout with her orison, hummin' a Prescient babbybie what she'd teached Catkin'n'Sussy Tick-tockin' was my thinkin'. Wasn't killin' her barb'ric'n'savage?

Ain't no right or wrong, the 'stron'mer king teached *me, jus' protectin your tribe or judasin your tribe, yay, jus' a strong will or a weak un. Kill her, bro. She ain't no god, she's only blood'n'tubes.*

I said I cudn't, the yibber'd tag me murderer an' Abbess'd call a gath'rin' what'd exile me from the Valleys.

Oh, think, Zachry, the king micked me. *Think! How'll the yibber know? Yibber'll say, "That knowed-all offlander ignored our yarns'n'ways an went tre-spyin up Mauna Kea an brave Zachry went 'long to try'n'minder her, but it turned out she weren't so Smart what she thinked."*

Beats passed. *All right,* I answered fin'ly'n'grim, *I'll spiker her when we step outside.* The priest-king smiled, pleased, an' din't speak no more. Fin'ly my victim howzitted me. *Fine,* said I, tho' I were nervy, see, the biggest thing I ever killed was goats an' now I'd vowed to kill a Prescient human. She said we should set off 'cos she din't want to get stranded in no blizzard up here an' leaded us back out the gen'rator.

Outside, the boulders'd falled silent in the ankle-snow. One snowstorm'd gone but another, bigger un was comin' so I reck'ned.
We walked t'ward the steely gate, her in front, me grippin' Jonas's spiker an' testin' its sharp on my thumb.
Do it now! say-soed ev'ry murd'rous stone on Mauna Kea.
Nothin' to be gained by dillyin', nay. Hushly I aimed at the top o' the Prescient's neck, an'

Sonmi have mercy on my soul, I thrust that sharky point home as hard as I could.

Nay, I din't murder her, see in a split-beat b'tween aimin' an' thrustin', Sonmi *had* mercy on my soul, yay she changed my aim an' that spiker went flyin' high over that steely gate. Meronym din't even cogg she'd nearly had her skull skewered, but I cogged sure 'nuff I'd been magicked by the devil o' Mauna Kea, yay, we all know his name, cuss him.
You see sumthin up there? asked Meronym, after my spiker.
Yay, I lied, *but it weren't no un, nay, it was jus' the tricks o this place.*
We're leavin', she said, *we're leavin' now.*
Old Georgie was outwitted, see, there weren't no means I could kill her quicksharp without my spiker, but he'd not jus' lay down an' watch my vic'try nay, I knowed that slywise buggah of old.
As I climbed up the rope with the gearbag, Mauna Kea took a lungsome breath an' howled giddyin' snow so I cudn't see the ground clearly an' ten winds tore our faces an' my fingers was stiff with cold an' halfway up I slid halfway down an' that rope burned my hands but fin'ly I hauled myself up top an' bringed up the gearbag with my painful stingin'n'raw palms. Meronym weren't so fast, but she weren't far from the top o' the wall when suddenwise time stopped.
Time stopped, yay, you heard right. For Hole World 'cept me an' a certain cunnin' devil, yay, you know which un came swagg'rin' along the wall, time was jus' … stopped.
Snowflakes hanged specklin' the air. Old Georgie swished 'em aside. *I tried reas'nin with you, Zachry, you stubbornsome boy, now I got to use warnin's an augurin's an say-so. Get out your blade an cut this rope thru.* His foot touched the rope what was holdin' time-freezed Meronym. Worn face screwed 'gainst the blizzard it was, an' her muscles strainin' to climb that rope. Twenty feet o' nothin' below. *Her fall may not kill her when I let time flow again,* Old Georgie seen my thinkin', *but them rocks b'low'll bust her spine'n'legs an she'll not s'vive the night. I'll let her consider her follyin's.*
I asked him why he din't jus' kill Meronym himself.
Why-why-why? Old Georgie micked. *I want you to do it, an here's why-why-why See, if you don't cut that rope, inside o three moons your dearsome fam'ly be dead, I vow it! I vow it. So you got a choosin. On one side you got Brave Ma, Strong Sussy, Bright Jonas, Sweet Catkin, all dead. Cowardy Zachry'll live on an regret'll flay him till his dyin day. On th' other side you got jus' one dead offlander no un'll miss. Four you love 'gainst one you don't. I may even magick Adam back from Kona.*
No bolt-hole out o' this. Meronym had to die.
Yay, no bolt-hole, boy. I'm countin to five …
I got my blade. A seed sprouted thru the crust o' my mem'ry an' that seed was a word Georgie'd speaked jus' then, *augurin*.
Quicksharp I chucked my blade down after my spiker an' looked that devil in his terrorsome eyes. He'd got the s'prised curio, an' his dyin' smile'd got a bucket o' dark meanin's. I spat at him, but my spit boom'ranged back on me. Why? Was I crazed'n'loonin'?
Old Georgie'd made a diresome mistake, see, he'd mem'ried me o' my augurin's from my

Dreamin' Night. *Hands are burnin, let that rope be not cut.* My decidin' was settled, see, my hands was burnin', so this was that rope Sonmi'd say-soed me not to cut.

My blade chimed on the ground an' time started an' the mil'yun hands'n'screams o' that devil's blizzard tore'n'pummeled me but cudn't hurl me off the 'closure wall, nay, somehow I pulled up Meronym an' got us down the other side too with no bones busted. We leaned 'gainst the furyin' white'n'dark snowstorm back to the 'stron'mers' village, we staggered'n'tripped an' got back more freezin'n livin', but a dry faggot was waitin' by Sonmi's grace an' I somehow got a fire cracklin' an' I vow that fire saved our lifes all over again. We boiled ice to water an' unfroze our bones an' dried our furs best we could. We din't speak none, we was too icy'n'drained. Did I regret spurnin' Old Georgie?

Nay not then, not now. Whatever Meronym's cause was for scalin' this cussed mountain, I din't b'lief she'd ever judas no Val-leysman, nay, not in my heart, an' the Kona'd o' done to the Valleys what happened sooner or later anyhow. That was in the future that first night from the summit. My friend gived us both med'sun pills after grinds an' we sleeped the no-dream sleep o' the 'stron'mer king.

Now, gettin' back to the Valleys weren't no summery stroll neither, nay, but tonight ain't the time to yarn them 'ventures. Meronym'n'me din't talk much goin' down, a sort o' trust'n'un-d'standin' tied us now. Mauna Kea'd done its cussed best to kill us but we'd s'vived it t'gether. I cogged she was far-far from her own fam'ly'n'kin, an' my heart ached for her lornsomeness. Abel welcomed us in his garrison dwellin' three evenin's later an' sent word to Bailey's we'd come back. Ev'ryun'd got jus' one question, *What did you* see *up there?* It was lornsome'n'hushly I telled 'em, with temples o' lost Smart'n'bones. But I din't breathe a word 'bout the 'stron'mer king nor what Meronym'd telled me 'bout the Fall an' speshly not my knuckly with Old Georgie, nay, not till years'd come'n'gone.

I und'standed why Meronym'd not said the hole true 'bout Prescience Isle an' her tribe too. People b'lief the world is built *so* an' tellin 'em it ain't *so* caves the roofs on their heads'n'maybe yours.

Old Ma Yibber spread the news that the Zachry what came down off Mauna Kea weren't the same Zachry what'd gone up, an' true 'nuff I s'pose, there ain't no journey what don't change you some. My cuz Kobbery 'fessed that mas'n'pas thru the Nine Valleys was warnin' their daughters 'gainst frolickin' with Zachry o' Bailey's 'cos they reck'ned I must o' bis'nessed with Old Georgie to 'scape that shrieky place with my soul still in my skull, an' tho' that weren't the hole true, it weren't the hole wrong. Jonas'n'Sussy din't mick with me like they once did. But Ma got weepy to see us home an' hugged me—*My little Zachaman*—an' my goats was gladsome an' Catkin din't change none. She'n'her bros at the school'ry'd made a new game, *Zachry'n'Meronym on Mauna Kea,* but Abbess say-soed 'em not to 'cos times are pretendin' can bend bein'. A whoah game it was, said Catkin, but I din't want to know its rules nor endin'.

By'n'by Meronym's last moon in Nine Valleys swelled up, an' time it was for the Honokaa Barter, the biggest gath'rin' o' Windward peoples, jus' once a year it comed round under the harvest moon, so for many days we was hard at work loomin' goatwool blankies what was our dwellin's bestest bart'rin'. Now, since my pa's killin' we'd trekked to Honokaa in groups o' ten or more, but that year there was twice that number 'cos o' the spesh Prescient loot we'd got, thanks to us hostin' Meronym. There was handcarts an' pack mules for all the dried meat'n'leather'n'cheese'n'wool. Wimoway'n'Roses was goin' to trade herbs what din't grow near the Valleys, tho' Roses'n'Kobbery was spoonyin' by then an' that was fine by me. I

wished my cuz luck 'cos luck he'd need an' a whip'n'iron back'n'all.
Crossin' Sloosha's Crossin' I'd to bear watchin' journeyers put fresh stones on Pa's mound, so our custom was my pa'd got a bucket o' friends'n'bros what loved him truesome. Up on Mauna Kea that devil was sharp'nin' his nails on a whetstone to feast on this cow-ardy liar, yay After Sloosha's came the zigzag up to Kuikuihaele. One handcart busted'n'tipped so slow'n'thirstsome goin' it was, yay, noon was long gone b'fore we reached the scraggy hamlet sit-tin' up the far side. Us young uns shimmed the cokeynut trees for grinds, an' ev'ryun welcomed that milk, no frettin'. Trampin' southly the buckin' Old-Un way t'ward Honokaa Town, the ocean breeze turned freshly an' our spirits was mended so we telled yarnies to shrink the miles, with the yarner sittin' backwards on the leadin' ass so ev'ryun could hear. Rod'rick yarned the Tale o' Rudolf the Red-Rnged Goat Thief an' Iron Billy's Hideous Spiker, an' Wolt sang a spoony song, "O Sally o' the Valleys-o," tho' we pelted him with sticks 'cos his singin' busted that liltsome tune. Then Unc' Bees asked Meronym to teach us a Prescient yarnie. She hes'tated a beat or two an' said Prescience tales was drippin' with regret'n'loss an' not good augurin' for a sunny aft'noon b'fore Barter Day but she could tell us a yarn what she'd heard from a burntlander in a far-far spot named Panama. We all yaysayed, so up she sat on the lead ass an' a short'n'sweet yarn she spoke what I'll tell you now so all you shut up, sit still an' someun fetch me a fresh cup o' spirit-brew, my throat's gluey'n'parched.

Back when the Fall was fallin', humans f'got the makin' o' fire. Oh, diresome bad things was gettin', yay Come night, folks cudn't see nothin', come winter they cudn't warm nothin', come mornin' they cudn't roast nothin'. So the tribe went to Wise Man an' asked, *Wise Man, help us, see we f'got the makin o' fire, an, oh, woe is us an all.*
So Wise Man summ'ned Crow an' say-soed him these words: *Fly across the crazed'n'jiffyin ocean to the Mighty Volcano, an on its foresty slopes, find a long stick. Pick up that stick in your beak an fly into that Mighty Volcano's mouth an dip it in the lake o' flames what bubble'n'spit in that fiery place. Then bring the burnin stick back here to Panama so humans'll mem'ry fire once more an mem'ry back its makin.*
Crow obeyed the Wise Man's say-so, an' flew over this crazed'n'jiffyin' ocean until he saw the Mighty Volcano smokin' in the near-far. He spiraled down onto its foresty slopes, nibbed some gooseb'ries, gulped of a chilly spring, rested his tired wings a beat, then sivvied round for a long stick o' pine. A one, a two, a three an' *up* Crow flew, stick in his beak, an' *plop* down the sulf'ry mouth o' the Mighty Volcano that gutsy bird dropped, yay, swoopin' out of his dive at the last beat, draggin' that stick o' pine thru the melty fire, *whooo-ooo-ooosh,* it flamed! Up'n'out o' that Crow flew from the scorchin' mouth, now flew with that burnin' stick in his mouth, yay, toward home he headed, wings poundin', stick burnin', days passin', hail slingin', clouds black'nin', oh, fire lickin' up that stick, eyes smokin', feathers crispin', beak burnin' … *It hurts!* Crow crawed. *It hurts!* Now, did he drop that stick or din't he? Do we mem'ry the makin' o' fire or don't we?
See now, said Meronym, riding backwards on that lead ass, *it ain't 'bout Crows or fire, it's 'bout how we humans got our spirit.*
I don't say that yarn's got a hole sack o' sense, but I always mem'ried it, an' times are less sense is more sense. Anyhow, the day was dyin' in soddy clouds an' we was still some miles shy o' Hono-kaa, so we tented up for the night an' throwed dice for watch, see, times was bad an' we din't want to risk no ambush. I got a six'n'six so maybe my luck was healin', so I thinked, fool o' fate what I am, yay what we all are.

Honokaa was the bustlin'est town o' noreast Windward, see, Old Uns'd builded it high 'nuff

to s'vive the risin' ocean, not like half o' Hilo nor Kona neither, what was flooded most moons. Honokaa men was traders'n'makers mostly, oh they worshiped Sonmi but they divvied their chances slywise an' worshiped Hilo gods too so we Valleysmen reck'ned 'em half savages. Their chief was called Senator, he'd got more power'n our Abbess, yay, he'd got an army o' ten–fifteen knuckly men with whoah spikers whose job was to force Senator's say-so, an' no un chose Senator, nay, it was a barb'ric pa-to-son bis'ness. Honokaa was a fair midway for Hilo'n'Honomu folks, an' Valleysmen'n'Mookini b'fore they was slaved, an' the hill tribes upcountry The town's Old-Un walls was rebuilded fresh an' blown-off roofs mended over'n'over, but you could still strolly round its narrow'n'windy streets an' 'magin' flyin' kayaks an' no-horse carts wheelyin' here'n'there. Last there was the bart'rin' hall, a whoah spacy buildin' what Abbess said was once named *church* where an ancient god was worshiped, but the knowin' of that god was lost in the Fall. Church'd got strong walls an' beautsome colored glass an' sat in a lushly green space with lots o' stone slabs for pennin' sheep'n'goats'n'pigs'n'all. Durin' the barter, Senator's guards manned the town gates an' storehouses an' they'd got a lockup too with iron bars. No armyman never knucklied no trader tho', not unless he thiefed or busted peace or law. Honokaa'd got more law'n anyplace else on Big Isle 'cept the Nine Folded Valleys I s pose, tho' law an' Civ'lize ain't always the same, nay, see Kona got Kona law but they ain't got one flea o' Civ'lize.

That bart'rin', we Valleysmen did a whoah good trade for ourselves an' the Commons. Twenty sacks o' rice from the hill tribes we got for the Prescient tarps, yay an' cows'n'hides from Parker's Ranch for the metalwork. We telled no un 'bout Meronym bein' an' offlander, nay, we named her Ottery o' Hermit Dwellin' from upgulch Pololu Valley, Ottery was a herb'list an' a lucky freakbirth, we said, to 'splain her black skin an' white tooths. The Prescients' gear we said was new salvage we'd finded in a stashed hideynick, tho' no un ever asks *So where'd you get this gear?* an' s'pects to hear a truesome answer. Old Ma Yibber keeps her slurryful mouth corked outside Nine Valleys, so when a storyman named Lyons asked me if I was the same Zachry o' Elepaio Valley what'd climbed Mauna Kea last moon, I was diresome s'prised. *Yay,* said I, *I'm Zachry o' that Valley, but I don't hate this life so much I'd go anywhere near the roof o* that *mountain, nay*. I said I'd gone huntin' presh leafs'n'roots with my last-life Aunt Ottery, but we din't go no higher'n where the trees stopped, nay, an' if he'd heard diff'rent, well, I were here tellin' him he'd heard wrong. Lyons's words was friendsome 'nuff but when my bro Harrit telled me he'd seen Lyons'n'Beardy Leary mutt'rin' down a smoky dead end I reck'ned I'd tell-tale him to Abbess when we got home an' see what she thinked. A rat's ass tang I'd always smelled comin' off Leary, an' I'd be findin' in jus' a bunch o' hours how, oh, how right I was.

Meronym'n'me bartered off our goatwool spinnin's'n'blankies'n'all pretty soon on, yay, I got a sack o' fine Manuka coffee, some plastic pipin' in fine nick, fat oats an' bags o' raisins from a dark Kolekole girl, an' more gear too what I don't mem'ry now. Kolekole folk ain't so savage I reck'n tho' they bury their dead uns b'neath them same longhouses where the livin' dwell 'cos they b'lief they'll be less lonesome there. Then I helped with our Commons barter for a beat or two then strolled here'n'there, howzittin' with some traders from round'bouts, savages ain't always bad folks, nay I learned the Mackenzymen'd dreamed up a shark god an' was sac'ficin' bladed 'n'footless sheeps into their bay. Usual tales I heard too 'bout Kona rowdy-in's eastly o' their normal huntin' grounds what shadowed all our hearts'n'minds. A crowd o' watchers I finded gatherin' round someun, nustlied nearer an' seen Meronym, or Ottery sit-tin' on a stool an' sketchin' people's faces, yay! She bartered her sketchin's for trinklety doodahs or a bite o' grinds, an' folks was gleesomer'n anythin', watchin' with 'mazement as their faces 'ppeared from nowhere onto paper, an' more folks clustered sayin', *Do me next! Do me next!* Folks asked her where she'd got that learnin' an' her answer was

always *It ain't learnin, bro, jus' practice is all.* Uglies she gived more beautsome'n their faces'd got, but artists'd done so all down hist'ry so Ottery the Sketchin' Herb'list said. Yay, when it came to faces, pretty lies was better'n scabbin' true.

Night fell an' we tromped back to our stores an' drawed lots for sentryin', then partyin' began in spesh dwellin's named bars. I did my sentryin' early on, then showed Meronym some places with Wolt an' Unc' Bees b'fore the musickers drawed us back to Church. A squeezywheezy an' banjos an' catfish fiddlers an' a presh rare steel guitar there was, an' barrels o' liquor what each tribe bringed to show their richness an' sacks o' blissweed 'cos where there's Hilo, oh, there's blissweed. I skanked deep on Wolt's pipe an' four days' march from our free Windward to Kona Leeward seemed like four mil'yun, yay, babbybies o' blissweed cradled me that night, then the drummin' started up, see ev'ry tribe had its own drums. Foday o' Lotus Pond Dwellin' an' two–three Valleysmen played goatskin'n'pingwood tom-toms, an' Hilo beardies thumped their flumfy-flumfy drums an' a Honokaa fam'ly beat their sash-krrangers an' Honomu folk got their shell-shakers an' this whoah feastin' o' drums twanged the young uns' joystrings an' mine too, yay, an' blissweed'll lead you b'tween the whack-crack an' boom-doom an' pan-pin-pon till we dancers was hoofs thuddin' an' blood pumpin' an' years passin' an' ev'ry drumbeat one more life shedded off of me, yay, I glimpsed all the lifes my soul ever was till far-far back b'fore the Fall, yay, glimpsed from a gallopin' horse in a hurrycane, but I cudn't describe 'em 'cos there ain't the words no more but well I mem'ry that dark Kolekole girl with her tribe's tattoo, yay, she was a saplin' bendin' an' I was that hurrycane, I blowed her she bent, I blowed harder she bent harder an' closer, then I was Crow's wings beatin' an' she was the flames lickin' an' when the Kolekole saplin' wrapped her willowy fingers around my neck, her eyes was quartzin' and she murmed in my ear, *Yay, I will, again, an yay, we will, again.*

Get up now, boy, my pa biffed me anxsome, *this ain't no mornin' for slug-gybeddin, cuss you.* That bubbly dream popped an' I waked proper under itchy Kolekole blankies. The dark girl'n'me was twined, yay, like a pair o' oily lizards swallowin' each other. She smelled o' vines'n'lava ash an' her olive breasts rose'n'fell an' watchin' her I got the tenderlies like she was my own babbit slumb'rin' by me. Bliss-weed was foggin' me still, an' I heard near-far shouts o' wild partyin' tho' a misty dawn was 'ready up, yay, it happens so at harvest bar-terin's, times are. So I yawned'n'stretched, yay, achin'n'feelin' all good'n'scooped, y'know how it is when you shoot up a beautsome girl. Smoky brekkers was bein' cooked nearby, so I put on my pants'n'jacket'n'all an' the Kolekole girl's eyes opened fawny an' she murmed, *Mornin, goatman,* an' I laughed an' said, *I'll be back with grinds,* an' she din't b'lief me so I settled I'd prove her wrong an' see her smile when I bringed her brekker. Outside the Kolekole storehouse was a cobbly track runnin' by the Town Wall, but northly or southly I din't cogg, so I was puzzlin' my path there when a Hono-kaa guard dropped from the rampart an' missed killin' me by inches.

My guts shot half up an' half down.

A crossbolt shaft stuck out his nose an' its point thru the back o' his head. Its iron point jolted that mornin' an' ev'rythin' into, oh, its horrorsome place.

That near-far wild partyin' were battlin'n'fightin', yay! That smokin' brekker was thatch burnin', yay! Now my first thinkin' was my people, so I backrabbited t'ward the Valleysmen's store in the town hub shoutin', *Kona! Kona!* Yay, the dark wings o' that dreadsome word beat furyin' thru Honokaa an' I heard a thund'ry splin-t'rin' an' a diresome shout kicked up an' I cogged the town gate was busted down. Now I got to the square, but whackaboom panickin' blocked my way an' fear, yay fear an' its hot stink turned me back. I roundybouted the narrow

roads, but nearer'n'nearer Kona roars an' horses an' bullwhips came, fillin' them misty'n'burnin' alleys like a tsunami an' I din't know what way I'd come nor was goin' an' *ker-bam!* I got shoved into the gutter by a milk-eyed old ma clubbin' thin air with a roller pin bansheein', *You'll never lay your filthsome hands on me,* but when I got up again she was still'n'pale, see, she'd got a crossbolt blossomin' her bosom an' suddenwise *whoah* a whip binded my legs t'gether an' *whoah* up I flew an' *whoah* down my head dropped an' *aieee* the pavestones smashed my skull, yay, fiercer'n a chop from a cold dammit chisel.

When I waked next my young body was an old bucket o' pain, yay, my knees was busted an' one elbow stiff'n'bruised an' my ribs chipped an' two teeth gone an' my jaws din't fit no more an' that lump on my head was like a second head. I was hooded like a goat b'fore slaught'rin' an' my hands'n'feet binded cruelsome an' laid flat on'n'under other sorrysome bodies, yay, I *hurt* like I'd never knowed b'fore nor since, nay! Cartwheels was groanin' an' iron shoes clip-cloppin' an' with each sway pain sloshed round my skull.

Well, there weren't no myst'ry. We was bein' slaved an' carted back to Kona jus' like my lost bro Adam. I weren't speshly gladsome at livin' still, I weren't nothin' jus' achin' an' helpless as a strung-up lardbird bein' bled from a hook. A squirmin' foot squashed my balls, so I murmed, *Anyun else awake here?* See, I thinked I may yet manage to rabbit out o' that hole, but a rook-raw Kona voice yelled jus' inches away, *Shut your mouths, my strappin lads, or I vow on my blade I'll slit the tongues from ev'ry last dingoshat one o you!* A warm wet quilted my arm, as someun lyin' on me pissed, what cooled to a chill wet as beats went by. I counted five Kona speakin', three horses, an' a cage o' chicklin's. Our slavers was discussin' the girls what they'd torn open'n'shooted up durin' the Honokaa raid, so I knowed I'd been hooded half the day or more. I din't have no hungry but, oh, I was thirsty as hot ash. One o' the Kona voices I cogged but I din't see how. Ev'ry long beatd bring a thund'rin' o' war hoofs 'long the road an' there'd be a *Howzit, Captain!* an' a *Yay, sir* an' *The battlin goes well!* an' so I learned the Kona'd not made jus' a reccyin' raid on Honokaa but was seizin' the hole o' northly Big I, yay, an' that meant the Valleys. My Nine Folded Valleys. *Sonmi,* I prayed, *Mer-cysome Sonmi, minder my fam'ly'n'kin.*

Fin'ly sleep dragged me off an' I dreamed o' the Kolekole girl, but her breasts'n'flank was made o' snow'n'lava rock, an' when I waked in that cart again I found a died slave under me was suckin' all the warmness out o' me. I shouted, *Hey, Kona, you got a died un here an maybe your cart horsed thank you to lose some draggin heavy. A* boy on top o' me yelped as the Kona driver whipflicked him to reward him for my oh-so-kindly consid'ration, he was the pisser maybe. I knowed by the birds' lilts evenin' was near, yay, an' all day we'd been carted. A long beat later we stopped an' off that cart I was hauled an' pricked by a spiker. I yelled an' wrigglied, heard a Kona say, *This un's still livin anyhow,* an' was lifted off'n'leaned 'gainst a hut-size rock, an' after a beat my hood was taken off. I sat up an' squinted in the mournsome dim. We was on the drizzly Waimea Track, an' I cogged 'zactly where, yay, see it was by the slopin' pond an' that hut-size rock we was leaned against was the selfsame rock where Meronym'n'me'd meeted Old Yanagi jus' a moon ago.

Now I watched the Kona sling away three died slaves for the dingos'n'ravens, an' I knowed why I'd cogged a fam'liar voice b'fore, see one of our capturers was Lyons the storyman bro o' Leary Storyman an' spyer, may Old Georgie cuss his bones. There was no Valleysmen 'cept me in the s'vivin' ten, nay, mostly Honomu'n' Hawi I reck'ned. I prayed one o' the slinged three wasn't Kobbery my cuz. All of us was young men, yay, so they'd killed the older uns back in Honokaa, I s'posed, Meronym too, I reck'ned, 'cos I knowed she cudn't s'vive nor 'scape such a furyin' attack. One o' the Kona poured a slug o' pond water on our faces, we

opened our mouths for ev'ry brackish drop but it weren't 'nuff to damp our parchin'. The chief say-soed their horse boy to tent up an' then spoke to his trembly catches. *Since this mornin',* said the painted bug-gah, *your lifes, yay, your bodies are Kona b'longin's, an the sooner you accept this, the likelier you'll s'vive as a slave o the true inheritors o Big I an one day Hole Ha-Why* Chief telled us our new lifes'd got new rules, but luck'ly the rules was easy learnin'. *First rule is, slaves do your Kona masters' say-so, quicksharp an no but-whyin. Bust this rule an your master'll bust you a bit, or a lot, d'pends on his will, till you learn better obeyin. Second rule is, slaves don't speak 'cept when your master asks em. Bust this rule an your master'll slit your tongue an I will too. Third rule is, you don't waste no time plottin scapes. When you're sold next moon you'll be branded on your cheeks with your master's mark. You'll never pass for pureblood Kona 'cos you ain't, true-be-telled* all *Windwards are freakbirthed shits. Bust this rule an I vow it, when you're catched your master'll blade off your hands an feet, blade off your cock to gag your mouth, an leave you by the wayside for the flies'n'rats feastin. Sounds like a quick death you may think, but I done it sev'ral times an s'prisin slowsome it is, b'lief me.* Chief said all good masters kill a bad or idlin' slave now'n'then to mem'ry the others what happens to slackers. Last, he asked if there was any complainers.

No complainers there weren't, nay Us peacesome Windward men was busted in body by wounds'n'thirst'n'hunger an' busted in spirit by the killin' we'd seen an' the slaved future we seen b'fore us. No fam'ly no freeness, no nothin' but work an' pain' an' work an' pain till we died, an' where'd our souls be rebirthed then? I wondered if I may meet Adam or if he was died 'ready or what. An elfy Hawi boy started blubbin' some, but he was jus' a niner or a tenner so no un hissed him to shuttup, in fact he shedded tears for all of us, yay Jonas'd be slaved most prob'ly an' Sussy'n'Catkin too, but they was grim thinkin's, see, both was pretty 'nuff girls. Ma was an agin' woman, tho' … What use'd the Kona find for her? I din't want to think 'bout the roller pin woman in Honokaa who'd whocked me into the ditch, but I cudn't stop myself. Lyons came over, said *Boo!* to the elfy boy so he blubbed badder, an' Lyons laughed, then yanked off my Prescient boots. He admired 'em on his own feet. *No more scavvin' up Mauna Kea for Zachry Goatboy,* that ju-daser speaked, *so he won't be needin these no more, nay.*

I din't say nothin', but Lyons din't like the *way* I din't say nothin' so he kicked my head'n'groin with my own boots. I weren't sure but I reck'n he was second in charge after chief leastways no un challenged him for my boots.

Night dripped an' the Kona roasted chicklin's over the fire an' any of us'd o' bartered our souls for a drip o' that chicklin' grease on our tongues. We was gettin' chill now, an' tho' the Kona din't want us too busted b'fore the slave market, they wanted us kept puny'n'frail 'cos we was ten but they was only five. They opened a cask o' liquor an' drank an' drank some more an' tore them delish-smellin' chicklin's an' drank some more. They murmed a bit an' looked at us, then a Kona was sent over to us with a torchin' stick. He held it by each of us while his tribesmen crowed *Yay!* or *Nay!* Fin'ly he un-binded the elfy Hawi's feet an' s'ported him hobblin' over to the campfire. There they warmed him an' fed him some chicklin' an' liquor. Us f'gotten slaves was bein' drained by hunger'n'pain an' the mozzies from the slopin' pond now an' we was envyin' that Hawi boy diresome, till at a nod from Lyons they ripped down Elfy's pants an' held him an' busted that boy's ring, oilin' his hole up with lardbird fat b'tween turns.

Lyons was porkerin' the sorrysome child when I heard a *kssssss* noise an' he jus' keeled over. The other four bust laughin', see they b'lieved Lyons was bladdered with liquor but then *ksss-ksss* an' two red spots grew b'tween another Kona's eyes an' he dropped stone dead too. A helmeted'n'caped Kona strided into the clearin' holdin' a sort o' shinbone what he pointed at

our last three catchers. Another *kssss* an' the boy Kona was felled. Now the chief grabbed his spiker an' hurled it at the helmeted killer, who dived'n'sort o' rolled cross the clearin' so the spiker tore his cloak but missed his body. A *ksssSSSsss* tore a slopin' gash cross the chief's torso an' he sort o' slid into two halfs. Hope creeped up on my shock but *crack!* The last Kona's bullwhip wrapped round that lethal killin' shinbone an' *crack!* That shooter quicksharped out o' the rescuer's hands an' into our catcher's hands like a magicky. Now the last Kona swivvied the weapon at our rescuer an' 'proached close so he cudn't miss an' I seen his hands squeeze its trigger an' *KSSSS!* The last Kona's head was missin' an' the breadfruit tree what'd stood b'hind him was a *whooosh* o' cindery flamin's cracklin'n'steamin' in the rain.

His body stood lonesome for a beat like a babbit learnin' to walk, then … *dumm-fff!* See, he'd errored the shooter's mouth for its ass and flashbanged his own head off. Our myst'ry Kona rescuer sat up, rubbin' elbows tendersome, plucked off his helmet, an' stared mis'rably at the five died uns.

I'm too old for this, Meronym said, grim'n'frownin'.

We unbinded the other slaves an' let 'em have the Kona's grinds, Meronym'd got 'nuff for us in her horse's saddlebags an' them un-slaved buggahs needed all the help they could get. All we took from the died five was my boots back off Lyons's foots. *In war,* Meronym teached *me, first you anx 'bout your boots, only second you anx 'bout grinds'n'all.* My rescuer gived me her full yarn a long beat later in this Old-Un ruin in trackless bush on the Leeward Kohalas what we found an' lit a small fire.

It ain't long in the yarnin', nay. Meronym weren't in the Val-leysmen's store when the Kona attacked Honokaa, nay, she was up on the town walls sketchin' the sea till a torchin' crossbolt kicked that sketchbook out o' her hands. She got back to the Valleysmen's store b'fore the town gate was down, but Unc' Bees shouted her I was missin', so she went off lookin' an' that was the last she seen o' my kin. Her horse'n'helmet she'd got from a Kona chief who'd charged down an alley an' din't charge out no more. In Kona gear an' riotsome annacky Meronym bluffed a way out o' the blood-shot'n'torchin' town. There weren't no battlin', nay, it was jus' more a roundup, see, the Senator's army s'rendered faster'n anyun. Meronym first rided northly Valleywards, but Kona was gath'rin' thick round Kuikuihaele for their swarm into the Valleys so she'd turned inland 'long the Waimea Track, but that road was thickly sentried an' she cudn't pass for Kona if stopped. Meronym turned southly reck'nin' to reach Hilo an' see if it was still in freesome hands. But Sonmi stayed her for long 'nuff to glance a cart trundlin' by an' stickin' out o' that cart was two feet, an' on those two feet was Prescient boots, an' only one Windwardsman she knowed what weared Prescient boots. She daren't try to rescue me in daylight, an' one time she lost the cart 'cos she'd roundybouted a platoon o' horses, an' if it weren't for the Kona's bladdery chorusin' as they gewgawed the Hawi boy she might've missed us in the dark an' ridden by. Oh, the risk she'd taked to rescue me! *Why dint you hide an save your skin proper?* asked I.

She made a *stoopit question* face.

Yay but what'd we do? My thinkin' was stormin'n'fearin'. *The Valleys is raided'n'burnin, prob'ly … an if Hilo ain't fallen yet, it'll fall soon …*

My friend jus' tended my wounds'n'hurtin's with bandagin's'n' stuff, then raised a cup'n'med'sun stone to my lips. *This'll help fix your busted body, Zachry Shut up your yibberin an sleep now.*

A murmin' man woked me in a leaky Old-Un shelter with leafs bustin' thru the window holes.

I was achin' in a dozen places but not painin' so sharply. Mornin' was brisk'n'leeward-smellin', but I mem'ried the desp'rate new age what was shadowin' Windward an', oh, in my head I groaned to be wakin'. 'Cross the room Meronym was speakin' thru her orison to that sternsome Prescient what'd catched me sivvyin' thru Meronym's gear that first time. I gazed on for a beat, marv'lin' once more, see, colors are spicier'n'brighter in orison windows. Soon he seen me risin' an' cogged me with a raise o' his head. Meronym turned too an' howzitted. *Better'n yesterday*. I stepped over to see that spesh Smart. My joints'n'bones groaned some. Meronym said I'd 'ready met this Prescient what she said was named Duophysite, an' I said I'd not f 'gotten 'cos he'd been so scarysome. The windowed Prescient was list'nin' to us, an' his skel'tony face soft'ned jus' one shade. *Oh, I wish we wasn't meetin in such dark times, Zachry,* said Duophysite, *but I'm askin you to guide Meronym on one last trek, to Ikat's Finger. You know it?*
Yay, I knowed it, northly from the Last Valley over Pololu Bridge, a long spit o' land what pointed nor'eastly Was the Ship an-chorin' for Meronym at Ikat's Finger?
The two Prescients bartered a glance, an' Duophysite spoked after a beat. *We got bad news of our own to teach you, sorrysome to say. The orisons on Prescience an the Ship ain't answered no transmission for days'n'days.*
What's a transmission? I asked.
A message, said Meronym, *a window, an orison gath'rin like we was dis-cussin with Duophysite now.*
I asked, *Are the orisons busted?*
Way worser it may be, speaked the windowed un, *see in recent moons a plague's neared Prescience Isle, westly from Ank'ridge, yay, a terrorsome sick what our Smart can't cure. Jus' one in two hundred what catch this plague s'vive it, yay. Us Prescients on Ha-Why we got to act like we're on our own now 'cos the Ship prob'ly ain't comin.*
But what 'bout Anafi, Meronym's son? Meronym's face made me wish I'd bit my tongue off b'fore I'd asked.
I got to live with not knowin, said my friend, so bleaksome I could o' blubbed. *I ain't the first un who lived so, an I ain't the last neither.*
Well, that yibber busted a hope in me what I'd not cogged I'd got. I asked Duophysite how many Prescients was there on Hole Ha-Why
Five, answered the man.
Five hun'erd? I asked.
Duophysite seen my dismay an' knowed it too. *Nay jus' five. One on each main I o the chain. Our hole true is simply telled, an it's time now you knowed it. We anxed this plagued reach Prescience an snuff out Civ'lize's last bright light. We was searchin for good earth to plant more Civ'lize in Ha-Why, an we dint want to scare you islandsmen by big numbers of offlanders.*
So you see, spoked Meronym now, *your fears 'bout my true aims'n'all wasn't total wrong.*
I din't care 'bout that no more. I said, if Prescients was like Meronym, yay, five thousand of 'em'd o' been welcomed in the Valleys.
Duophysite darked, thinkin' how few Prescients might be livin' now. *The boss o my tribe here on Maui where I'm speakin to you from is a friend-some leader same as your Abbess. He's say-soed two war kayaks to cross the Maui Straits what'll be at Ikat's Finger come noon the day after morrow.*
I vowed him I'd get Meronym safe there by then.
Then I can thank you for helpin her in person. Duophysite plussed thered be space on them kayaks if I wanted to 'scape off Big I with her.
That settled my mind. *Thank you,* I telled the stranded Prescient, *but I got to stay an' find my*

fam'ly

We stayed hid in that ruin one more night for my muscles to knit'n'my bruisin' to heal. Heartbuggahin' it was not rushin' back to the Valleys for battlin' or reccyin', but Meronym seen the Kona horses'n'crossbowmen pourin' t'ward the Valleys via Kuikuihaele an' she 'ssured me, there'd not o' been no dragged battlin' for Nine Valleys yay it'd all o' been over in hours not days, nay

Bleaksome'n'haunted day it was. Meronym teached me how to use that spesh shinboney shooter. We practiced on pineapples then giant burrs then acorns till my aim was sharp. I sentried while Meronym sleeped, then she sentried while I sleeped some more. Soon our fire was dirtyin' twilight mist again an' we dined on Kona rations o' salt mutton'n'seaweed an' *lilikoi* fruits what growed in that ruin. I filled the horse's oat bag an' petted him an' named him Wolt 'cos he was ugly as my cuz, then gloomed hurtsome, wond'rin' who o' my kin was still livin'. True-be-telled, not knowin' the worst is badder'n knowin' it.

A flutterby-thinkin' touched me, an' I asked Meronym why a Shipwoman rode horses as good as any Kona. She 'fessed most Pre-scients cudn't ride no animal, but she'd lived with a tribe called the Swannekke what lived way past Ank'ridge an' way past Far Couver. The Swannekke bred horses like Valleysmen bred goats, yay, an' their littl' uns could ride b'fore they could walk, an' she'd learnt durin' her seasons with them. Meronym teached me lots 'bout the tribes she'd lived 'mongst, but I ain't got time for those yarns now, nay, it's gettin' late. We speaked 'bout the 'morrow's route to Ikat's Finger, see, one way was to follow the Kohalas' razorback over Nine Valleys, but 'nother way was to follow Waipio River down to Abel's Garrison first an' spy what we'd spy. We din't know see if the Kona'd slashed'n'burned then emptied the Valleys like they'd done the Mookini or if they was aimin' to conquer'n'settle our dwellin's an' slave us in our own lands. Now I'd vowed to get Meronym to Ikat's Finger safe'n'sound an' reccyin' 'bout Kona horsemen weren't safe nor sound, but Meronym say-soed we'd spy the Valleys first an' so the 'morrow's way was settled.

Dawn fogged waxy'n'silty It weren't easy gettin' the horse over the Kohala Ridge'n'thickets to Waipio Spring, not knowin' if a Kona platoon was waitin' thru the walls o' cane we was noisesomely hackin'. Mostly we'd to walk'n'lead the beast, but we reached the spring fin'ly by noon an' tethered him in a hollow upgulch an' creeped the mile to Abel's 'long the spruce spur. Fog turned ev'ry tree stump into a huddled Kona sentry, but still I was thanksome to Sonmi for the camo. We spied over the peerin' lip an' looked down on the garrison. Grim viewin', yay Only Abel's gates stood shut, see, the walls'n'outbuildin's was all charred'n'busted. A naked man was hanged off the gate bar, yay, by his ankles in the Kona way, maybe it were Abel an' maybe it weren't, but crows was 'ready minin' his guts an' a pair o' ballsy dingos scavvin' dropped slops.

Now as we watched, a thirty–forty-head roundup o' slaved Val-leysmen was bein' shunted out to Kuikuihaele. I'll mem'ry that sight till my dyin' day an' longer. Some was mulin' carts o' loot'n'gear. Kona shouts'n'say-soes ruckused an' whips crackled. The fog was too swampy for me to make out my tribesmen's faces, but, oh, sorrysome was their figures dragglin' out t'ward Sloosha's Crossin'. Ghosts. Livin' ghosts. *Watch the fate o the last Civ'lized tribe o the Big I,* thinked I, *yay, the result of our school'ry'n'Icon'ry, jus' slaved for Kona fields an dwellin's an stables an beds an holes in Leeward ground.*

What could I do? Rush 'em? Some twenty Kona horsemen was convoyin' 'em off the Leeward. Even with Meronym's shooter I could maybe take out five o' the twenty sentries, maybe more if I got lucky but then what? The Kona'd spiker ev'ry Valleysman to death at the

first whisp o' knucklyin'. This weren't Zachry the Cowardy knuck-lyin' Zachry the Brave, nay, it was Zachry the Soosider knucklyin' Zachry the S'viver, an' I ain't got no shame to say which Zachry vic'tried. To Meronym I signaled we was retreatin' back to the horse tho' tears was in my eyes.

Short-ass, get me a roasted taro. Mem'ryin' that despair is hollowin' me out.

Now backtrackin' up to the Kohala grazin' pastures, the mist slid b'low us an' southly rose Mauna Kea from that ocean o' cloud, clear'n'close 'nuff to spit at so it seemed, so I did, yay I spitted hard. My soul may be stoned an' my luck may be rotted but I can still cuss a cuss. From each o' the Nine Folded Valleys black cobras o' smoke was risin' an' ev'ry carrion winger'n'legger on Big I was crawk-in'n'feastin' in our Valleys that mornin' I reck'ned. Up in the pastures we finded goats scattered, some o' mine, some from Kaima, but we din't see not one goatherd, nay. I milked some, an' we drank the last free Valleysman's goat milk. Thru Vert'bry Pass we downed t'ward Thumb Rock, where Meronym'd sketched her map five moons b'fore, yay, over the heathery turf what'd cupped Roses under me six moons b'fore. Sun steamed the mist'n'dew away, an' thru a fine-weaved rainbow I seen the school'ry was razed, yay, jus' a black shell now, the last books an' the last clock. Down we rode to Elepaio Stream, where I got off an' Meronym helmeted up an' loosely roped my hands so if we was spied it'd look like she'd slaved a 'scaped run'way an' maybe win us a lethal beat. Down the track we walked this way to Cluny's, what was the highest dwellin' upgulch. Meronym dismounted an' gripped her shooter as we creeped hushly as mouses thru the buildin's, but my heart weren't hushly nay. A big knuckly'd happened there an' gear was crashed'n'busted, but no bodies was lyin' round, nay. We taked some fresh grinds for the journey ahead, I knowed Clunyd not o' minded. Leavin' Cluny's front gate I spied a cokeynut spikered on a stained pole with flies buzzin' what was wyrd'n'unnat'ral, so we peered closer an' it weren't no cokeynut, nay, it was Macca Cluny's head, yay with his pipe still poked in his mouth.

Such barb'ric buggahs are them painted Kona, bros. You trust one once you're a dead man, b'lief me. Macca's head gived me furyin' nervies as we trekked further down to Bailey's Dwellin'.

A pail o' curdlin' goat milk stood in the milk'ry an' I cudn't stop 'maginin' Sussy bein' dragged away from that upbusted milkin' stool an' what'd been done to her, oh, my poor'n'sweet'n'dear sis. A possy o' hoofs stamped the yard mud. Goats was all shooed away, our chicklin's thiefed. So hush. No loom clackin', no Catkin singin', no Jonas makin' nothin'. The stream an' a laughin' thrush in the eaves an' nothin' else. No horrorsome sight on the gatepost, I thanked Sonmi for that much. Inside, eggs'n'apricocks was spilled from the upturned table. Ev'ry room I was dreadin' what I'd find but, nay, by the grace o' Sonmi it seemed my fam'ly'd not been slayed yet …

Guilt an' sorrow whacked me.

Guilt 'cos I always s'vived an' 'scaped despite my dirtsome'n'stony soul. Sorrow 'cos the ruins o' my busted old life was strewed here 'n'there'n'ev'rywhere. Jonas's toys what Pa'd whittled years ago. Ma's loomwork hangin' in the doorways, swayin' in the last o' summer's soft breathin'. Burnt fish an' blissweed hanged in the air. Catkin's writin' work for school'ry still lied on the table where she was workin'. Din't know what to think or say or what. *What do I do?* I asked my friend as I asked me. *What do I do?*

Meronym sat on a wood box Jonas'd made, what Ma'd called his first masterwork. *A bleaksome'n'dark choice to settle, Zachry,* she replied. *Stay in the Valleys till you're slaved. 'Scape to Hilo an stay till the Kona attack an be killed or slaved. Live in backwilds as a hermit*

bandit till you're catched. Cross the straits to Maui with me an' prob'ly never return to Big I no more. Yay, that was my all choices, no frettin', but I cudn't settle one, all I knowed was that I din't want to run away from Big I without vengeancin' whatd happened here.
This ain't the safest place to sit'n'think, Zachry, said Meronym, so ten-dersome that fin'ly my tears oozed out.

Mountin' the horse to leave back upgulch, I mem'ried my fam'ly's icons in our shrine. Now, if I left 'em there to be axed by n'by for firewood thered be nothin' to proof the Baileys Dwellin' kind ever existed. So back I ran alone to get 'em. Comin' back down the passage, I heard crock'ry fall off the pantry shelf. I freezed.
Slowsome I turned an' looked.
A fat rat strutted there, stink-eyein' me an' twitchin' its whisk'ry nose. *Bet you're sorryin you din't jus' cut that rope on the wall o my 'closure now, Zachry, yay? All this woe'n'grief you could o voided.*
I din't list'n to that liar's liar. The Kona'd o' attacked anyhow, yay it weren't nothin' to do with me defyin' that Dev'lish Buggah. I picked up a pot to hurl at Old Georgie, but when I taked aim the fat rat'd dis'peared, yay, an' from the empty room to my left came a breezy sighin' from the bed where I din't see b'fore. I should o' jus' rabbited, yay, I knowed it but I din't, I tippytoed in an' seen a Kona sentry lyin' there in a soft nest o' blankies an' skankin' deep on Mormon Valley blissweed. See, he'd been so sure us Valleysmen was all rolled over'n'slaved that he'd blissed out, on duty
So here was the fearsome en'my. Nineteen–twenty maybe he was. A vein pulsed in his Adam's apple what was left white b'tween two lizardy tattoos. *You found me, yay, so slit me,* whisped that throat. *Blade me.*
My second augurin', you'll be mem'ryin' an', yay, so was I. *Enemy's sleeping, let his throat be not slit.* This was the beat that augurin'd foreseen, no frettin'. I say-soed my hand'n'arm to do it, but they was locked'n'springed somehow. I'd been in knucklies 'nuff who ain't? but I'd never killed no un b'fore. See, murderin' was forbid-ded by Valleysmen law, yay, if you stole another's life no un'd barter nothin' with you nor see you nor nothin' 'cos your soul was so poisoned you may give 'em a sickness. Anyhow I stood there, by my own bed, my blade inches from that soft, pale throat.
That laughin' thrush was yarnin' fast'n'loud. Bird lilts sound like blades bein' sharp'ned, I cogged for the first time there'n'then. I knowed why I shudn't kill this Kona. Itd not give the Valleys back to the Valleysmen. Itd stony my cussed soul. If I'd been rebirthed a Kona in this life, he could be me an' I'd be killin' myself. If Adam'd been, say, adopted an' made Kona, this'd be my brother I was killin'. Old Georgie *wanted* me to kill him. Weren't these reasons 'nuff jus' to leave him be an' hushly creep away?
Nay, I answered my en'my an' I stroked my blade thru his throat. Magicky ruby welled'n'pumped an' frothed on the fleece an' puddled on the stone floor. I wiped my blade clean on the dead un's shirt. I knowed I'd be payin' for it by'n'by but like I said a while back, in our busted world the right thing ain't always possible.

Goin' out I bumped Meronym rushin' in. *Kona!* she hissed. There weren't no time to 'splain what I'd done in there an' why Hurryin', I stuffed my fam'ly's icons in the saddlebags, an' she hoicked me on the horse. Comin' up the track from Aunt Bees's was three–four horses cloppin'. Oh, we speeded out o' Bailey's for the final time like Old Georgie was bitin' our asses. I heard men's voices b'hind an' glanced back an' even saw their armor glintin' thru the fig orchards, but by Mercysome Sonmi, they din't see us vanishin'. One beat later we heard a

shrill conchin's echo up the Valley, yay three blasts it was, an' I knowed the Kona must o' found that sentry I'd slayed an' was sendin' an alarm out, *Valleysmen ain't all slaved or mass'kered*. I knowed I'd be payin' for ignorin' the second augurin' sooner'n I'd gambled, yay an' Meronym too.
But our luck din't yet wilt. Other conchin's answered the first, yay, but they was downgulch an' we galloped back thru Vert'bry Pass anxin' but we wasn't ambushed. One whoah narrow escape it was, yay, one more beat at my dwellin' an' them Kona horsemen'd o' seen an' chased us. Avoidin' the open Kohala Ridge'n'pastures, we skirted the forest for camo, an' only then did I 'fess to Meronym what I'd done back to that sleepin' sentry. I don't know why it is, but secrets jus' rot you like teeth if you don't yank 'em out. She just list'ned, yay an' she din't judge me none.

I knowed a hid cave by Mauka Waterfall, an' to here it was I took us for what'd be Meronym's final night on Big Isle if ev'rythin' worked as planned. I'd hoped Wolt or Kobbery or 'nother goatherd may o' 'scaped an' be hidin' there but, nay, it was empty, jus' some blankies what we goatherds stashed for sleepin'. The trade wind was giddyuppin', an' I feared for the kayakers who'd be settin' out from Maui at dawn, but it weren't so chillsome so I din't risk no fire, not so near the en'my, nay I bathed my wounds in the pool an' Meronyn bathed an' we ate the grinds I'd got from Cluny's an' fig loaf what I grabbed from my own dwellin' when I'd gone back for the icons.
I cudn't stop mem'ryin'n'yarnin' while we ate, nay, 'bout my fam'ly an' Pa'n'Adam too, it was like if they lived in words they cudn't die in body. I knowed I'd miss Meronym diresome when she was gone, see I din't have no other bro on Big I who weren't 'ready slaved. Lady Moon rose an' gazed o'er my busted'n'beautsome Valleys with silv'ry'n'sorryin' eyes, an' the dingos mourned for the died uns. I wondered where'd my tribesmen's souls be reborned now Valleyswomen'd not be bearin' babbits here. I wished Abbess was there to teach me, 'cos I cudn't say an' nor could Meronym. *We Pre-scients,* she answered, after a beat, *b'lief when you die you die an there ain't no comin back.*
But what 'bout your soul? I asked.
Prescients don't b'lief souls exist.
But ain't dyin' terrorsome cold if there ain't nothin' after?
Yay—she sort o' laughed but not smilin', nay*—our truth is terror-some cold.*
Jus' that once I sorried for her. Souls cross the skies o' time, Abbess'd say, like clouds crossin' skies o' the world. Sonmi's the east'n'west, Sonmi's the map an' the edges o' the map an' b'yonder the edges. The stars was lit, an' I sentried first, but I knowed Meronym weren't sleepin', nay, she was thinkin'n'tossin' under her blanky till she gived up an' sat by me watchin' the moonlighted waterfall. Questions was mozziein' me plaguesome. The fires o' Valleysmen an' Prescients both are snuffed tonight, I speaked, so don't that proof savages are stronger'n Civ'lized people?
It ain't savages what are stronger'n Civ'lizeds, Meronym reck'ned, *it's big numbers what're stronger'n small numbers. Smart gived us a plus for many years, like my shooter gived me a plus back at Slopin Pond, but with nuff hands'n'minds that plus'll be zeroed one day.*
So is it better to be savage'n to be Civ'lized?
What's the naked meanin b'hind them two words?
Savages ain't got no laws, I said, but Civ'lizeds got laws.
Deeper'n that it's this. The savage sat'fies his needs now. He's hungry, he'll eat. He's angry, he'll knuckly He's swellin, he'll shoot up a woman. His master is his will, an if his will say-soes "Kill" he'll kill. Like fangy animals.

Yay that was the Kona.
Now the Civ'lized got the same needs too, but he sees further. He'll eat half his food now, yay, but plant half so he won't go hungry morrow. He's angry, he'll stop'n think why so he won't get angry next time. He's swellin, well, he's got sisses an daughters what need respectin so he'll respect his bros sisses an daughters. His will is his slave, an if his will say-soes, "Don't!" he won't, nay.
So, I asked 'gain, is it better to be savage'n to be Civ'lized?
List'n, savages an Civ'lizeds ain't divvied by tribes or b'liefs or mountain ranges, nay, ev'ry human is both, yay. Old Uns'd got the Smart o gods but the savagery o jackals an that's what tripped the Fall. Some savages what I knowed got a beautsome Civ'lized heart beatin in their ribs. Maybe some Kona. Not nuff to say-so their hole tribe, but who knows one day? One day.
"One day" was only a flea o' hope for us.
Yay, I mem'ry Meronym sayin', *but fleas ain't easy to rid.*
Lady Moon lit a whoahsome wyrd birthmark jus' b'low my friend's shoulder blade as she sleeped fin'ly. A sort o' tiny hand mark it were, yay, a head o' six streaks strandin' off, pale 'gainst her dark skin, an' I curioed why I'd never seen it b'fore. I covered it over with the blanky so she din't catch cold.

Now Mauka Stream falled snaky n'goshin' down dark Mauka Valley, yay it watered only five–six dwellin's in the hole valley 'cos it weren't no friendsome'n'summery place, nay No Mauka dwellin' did goatin', so the track was strangled by creepers'n'thornbushes what'd whelk your eye out if you din't watch close, an' hard goin' it was for the horse. I got clawed fierce after a quart' mile even shelt'rin' b'hind Meronym. The last dwellin' upvalley an' the first we comed to was Saint-Sonmi's Dwellin', whose chief was a one-eye named Silvestri who farmed taro'n'oats. The yibber reck'ned Silvestri was too fond o' his many daughters'n was nat'ral an' skank-mouthed him for not payin' no fairshare to Commons. Laundry was scattered round the yard an' the daughters'd been taken, but Silvestri'd not gone nowhere, his bladed head was up on the pole watchin' us as we rided up. Some time he'd been there, see, he'd gotten maggoty an' a fat rat'd scamped up the pole an'd eaten thru one eyeball as we rided up. Yay, the whiskery devil twitched his sharp nose at me. *Howzit, Zachry, don't you reck'n Silvestri looks handsomer now'n b'fore?* But I din't pay him no mind. A cocklydoo 'rupted from the chimney pot an' nearly shocked me off the horse, see, I thinked it was an ambush yell. Now we'd a choice o' sorts, to farewell the horse an' spider up the crumbly ridge over to Pololu Valley, or to follow the Mauka Trail down to the shore an' risk runnin' into stray Kona moppin' up their attackin'. Dwindlin' time choosed for us to stay on the horse, see, we'd to get to Ikat's Finger by noon what was still ten miles far from Silvestri's. We missed Blue Cole Dwellin' an' Last Trout too, see, we wasn't reccyin' no more. A tide o' rain skirted us downval-ley from the Kohalas, but we got to the shore without no ambush tho' we seen fresh Kona prints b'neath the knife-finger palms. The ocean was no pond that day, nay, but nor so hilly a craft'ly oared kayak'd overtoss. A Kona conch churned in the near-far an' vibed me uneasy. I heard my name in its churnin'. The air was drummed tight, an' I'd ignored my second augurin', I'd knowed I'd be payin' for that life I taked what weren't ne'ssary to take. Where the rucky beach rocked up into Medusa Cliffs we had to wind inland thru banana groves to the Pololu Track, what leaded out o' the northliest valley into No Un's Land an' fin'ly Ikat's Finger. The track squeezed thru two fat black rocks, an' we heard a whistlin' what

was more human'n bird. Meronym reached in her cloak, but b'fore she'd got the shinboney two sharky Kona sentries'd leapt down both sides on both rocks. That was four cock'n'primed crossbows aimed right at our heads from inches. Thru rubbery trees I spied a hole dammit Kona platoon! A dozen horsemen or more was sittin' round a tentment, an' I knowed we was finished so near the end an' all.

Pass code, horseman? barked one sentry

What's this, soldier, an why? Another jiggered his crossbow at my nips. *A Valleysboy's ass smearin a good Kona horse? Who's your gen'ral, horseman?*

I was fearin' diresome, an' I knowed I looked it.

Meronym did an eerie'n'angry yarlin' growl an' looked thru her helmet at the four, then 'rupted a shout out so blastsome, birds skimmed off krawlin' an' her tongue-slant was buried under furyin' noise. *HOW DARE YOU DAMMIT RAT-SHAT HOG-SLITS ADDRESS A GEN'RAL IN THAT MANNER! MY SLAVE'S ASS'LL SMEAR WHEREVER AN' WHATEVER I SAY-SO! WHO'S MY GEN'RAL? MY GEN'RAL IS* ME *YOU DAMMIT WORMS' BLADDERS! OFF THAT ROCK* THIS SPLIT-BEAT *AN' BRING ME YOUR CAPTAIN NOW OR I VOW BY ALL THE WAR GODS I'LL HAVE YOU PEELED'N'NAILED TO THE NEAREST HORNET TREE!*

A desp'rate an' freakbirthed plan, yay

Meronym's bluff vic'tried jus' one beat, an' one beat was nearly 'nuff Two sentries paled an' lowered their crossbows an' jumped down in our path. Two more dis'peared the back way. *Ksss! Ksss!* Them two Kona b'fore us din't get up no more, Meronym sudden-wise heel-digged, an' our horse whinnied'n'reared'n'bolted'n'my balance was busted. Sonmi's hand stayed me on the saddle, yay, 'cos if hers din't whose did? Shouts an' *Stops!* an' conches ruckused b'hind us, an' the horse galloped an' *a fissssssssss-kwangggggggggg* as the first crossbolt bedded into a bough I ducked under, then a crackle o' pain flamed in my left calf jus' here an' I got that sick'n'calm shock you get when your body knows sumthin's way too busted for an easy mendin'. Look, I'll roll my trousers an' you can see the scar where the crossbolt tip bedded … yay it hurt as much as it looks it hurt an' more.

We was gallopin' down Pololu Track now over knotty'n'rooty ground, faster'n surfin' inside a roller an' as hard to stay balanced, an' there was nothin' I could do 'bout that seizin' agonyin' 'cept grip Meronym's waist tighter'n'tighter an' try'n ride the horse's rhythmin' with my right leg or I'd be tossed right off, yay, an' there'd not be no time to mount me on again b'fore the Kona an' their bone-drillin' crossbolts catched us up.

The track leaded thru the scalp-brushin' tunnel o' trees to the Old Uns' bridge over the Pololu River's sea mouth, what marked the Valley's northly bound'ry. Now we was jus' a hun'erd paces shy o' this bridge when the sun unclouded an' I looked ahead an' its worn plankin' burned bright'n'gold, an' its rusted struts was shaded bronze. My pain shaked loose a mem'ry yay, my third augurin': *Bronze is burnin, let that bridge be not crossed*. I cudn't 'splain to Meronym on a gallopin' horse, so I jus' yelled in her ear, *I'm hit!*

She pulled up the horse a yard shy o' the bridge. *Where?*

My left calf, I telled her.

Meronym looked back anxin' diresome. Weren't no sign of our chasers yet, so she swung down to the ground an' peered at the pain. She touched my wound an' I groaned. *Right now the shaft's plug-gin the wound, yay, we got to get to friendsome ground first then I'll—*

Drummin' o' vengesome hoofs was nearin' up Pololu Track.

I telled her then, we cudn't cross that bridge. *What?* She twisted to fix my eyes. *Zachry, are you sayin that bridge ain't safe?*

Now so far's I knowed the bridge was strong 'nuff see, I often taked Jonas gull-eggin' northly when he was littler, an' McAulyff o' Last Trout went seal-huntin' over it with his handcart

most moons, but an' Icon'ry dreamin' din't lie, nay, not never, an' Abbess'd made me mem'ry my augurin's for a spesh day an' that day was now. *I'm sayin,* I said, *Sonmi telled me not cross to it.*
Fear made Meronym sarky see, she was jus' human like you'n'me. *An did Sonmi know we got a furyin swarm o Kona on our tail?*
Pololu River is wide at its sea mouth, I teached her, so it ain't whooshin' deep nor its current so sinewy. The track forked b'fore the bridge right where we was, yay an' it leaded down jus' a stretch away where we could ford the river. The hoofs drummed closer'n'closer, an' soon the Kona'd be seein' us.
Well, Meronym b'liefed my loonsome say-so, I cudn't say why but she did, an' soon the bright'n'cold Pololu was up numbin' my wound but the horse was slippin' diresome on the shingly riverbed. *Padddooom padddooom,* three Kona galloped onto the bridge an' seen us, an' the air round us quavered'n'slit with one crossbolt, two, the third hit the water an' sprayed us. Three new Kona catched up the first three an' din't stop to shoot, nay, they was padddooomin' 'cross Pololu Bridge to cut us off on the far bank. Desp'rate I was, cussin' myself, *Yay, we're died lardbirds no frettin,* I was thinkin'.
Now you know when you adze down a tree for lumber? The noise after the last stroke, o' fibers shriekin' an' the hole trunk groanin' slowsome as it falls? That's what I heard. See one or two Valleysmen crossin' hushly with a handcart was one thing, but a gallopin' horse was another, an' six–seven–eight gallopin' Kona armored warhorses was too much. That bridge busted like it was made o' spit'n'straw, yay, struts snapped an' plankin' split an' worn cables pinged.
It weren't no little drop, nay It was fifteen men high or more was Pololu Bridge. Down fell the horses, spinnin' belly-up, the riders catched in their stirrups an' all, an' like I said the Pololu River weren't a safe deep pool what'd catch 'em an' buoy 'em up, nay, it was a crowded river o' fat tabley'n'pointy rocks what busted their falls bad, diresome bad. None o' the Kona got up, nay jus' two–three sorrysome horses lay writhin'n'kickin', but it weren't no time for animal doctorin', nay

Well, my yarn's nearly done'n'telled now. Meronym'n'me forded the far side, an' I prayed my thanks to Sonmi tho' there weren't no Valleys Civ'lize to save no more, she'd saved my skin one last time. I s'pose the rest o' the Kona platoon was too busy with their died'n'drowned to come trackin' us two, yay We crossed the Lorn-some Dunes an' fin'ly reached Ikat's Finger with no ax'dents. No kayaks was waitin' yet, but we dismounted an' Meronym used her Smart on that crossbolt-mauled calf o' mine. When she pulled the bolt out, the pain traveled up my body an' hooded my senses so true-be-telled I din't see the Maui kayaks arrivin' with Duophysite. Now my friend had a choice to settle, yay, see, either she loaded me in that kayak or left me on Big Isle not able to walk nor nothin' jus' a short ride off from Kona ground. Well, here I am yarnin' to you, so you know what Meronym settled, an' times are I regret her choosin', yay, an' times are I don't. The chanty o' my new tribe's rowers waked me halfway 'cross the Straits. Meronym was changin' my bleeded bindin', she'd used some Smart med'sun to numb its pain a hole lot.
I watched clouds awobbly from the floor o' that kayak. Souls cross ages like clouds cross skies, an' tho' a cloud's shape nor hue nor size don't stay the same, it's still a cloud an' so is a

soul. Who can say where the cloud's blowed from or who the soul'll be 'morrow? Only Sonmi the east an' the west an' the compass an' the atlas, yay, only the atlas o' clouds.
Duophysite saw my eyes was open an' pointed me Big Isle, purple in the sou'eastly blue, an' Mauna Kea hidin' its head like a shy bride.
Yay, my Hole World an' hole life was shrinked 'nuff to fit in the O o' my finger'n'thumb.

***

Zachry my old pa was a wyrd buggah, I won't naysay it now he's died. Oh, most o' Pa's yarnin's was jus' musey duck fartin' an' in his loonsome old age he even b'liefed Meronym the Prescient was his presh b'loved Sonmi, yay he 'sisted it, he said he knowed it all by birthmarks an' comets'n'all.
Do I b'lief his yarn 'bout the Kona an' his fleein' from Big I? Most yarnin's got a bit o' true, some yarnin's got some true, an' a few yarnin's got a lot o' true. The stuff 'bout Meronym the Prescient was mostly true, I reck'n. See, after Pa died my sis'n'me sivvied his gear, an' I finded his silv'ry egg what he named *orison* in his yarns. Like Pa yarned, if you warm the egg in your hands, a beautsome ghost-girl appears in the air an' speaks in an Old-Un tongue what no un alive und'stands nor never will, nay It ain't Smart you can use 'cos it don't kill Kona pirates nor fill empty guts, but some dusks my kin'n'bros'll wake up the ghost-girl jus' to watch her hov'rin'n'shimm'rin'. She's beautsome, and she 'mazes the littl' uns an' her murmin's babbybie our babbits.

Sit down a beat or two.

Hold out your hands.

Look.

AN ORISON OF SONMI~451

Then who was *Hae-Joo Im, if he was not xactly who he said he was?*
I surprised myself by answering that question: Union.
Hae-Joo said, "That honor is mine to bear, yes."
Xi-Li, the student, was xtremely agitated.
Hae-Joo told me I could trust him or be dead in a matter of minutes.

I nodded assent: I would trust him.

But he had already lied to you about his ID—why believe him this time? How did you know for sure he wasn't abducting you?
I did not know: I was not sure. My decision was based on *character*. I could only hope time would prove it well founded. We abandoned the ancient Cavendish to his fate and fled to our own: down corridors, thru fire doors, avoiding lites and people where possible. Hae-Joo carried me down flites of stairs: we could not wait for me to navigate them unaided.
In a subbasement Mr. Chang waited in a plain ford. There was no time for greetings. The vehicle screamed into life and accelerated thru tunnels and empty ford parks. Mr. Chang glanced at his sony reporting that the slipway still appeared to be accessible. Hae-Joo ordered him to proceed there, then got a flickknife from his pouch and sliced off the tip of his left index, gouged, and xtracted a tiny metallic egg. He threw it out of the window and ordered me to discard my Soulring similarly. Xi-Li also xtracted his Soul.
Unionmen really *cut out their own eternal Souls? I always thought it was an urban myth …*
How else can a resistance movement elude Unanimity? They would risk detection whenever they passed a traffic lite otherwise. The ford rounded a ramp when a blizzard of phosphate fire shot in the windows; glass filled the air, metal panels groaned; the ford scraped along walls, jarring to an abrupt stop.
From my crouch I heard coltfire.
The ford wailed and sped into motion. A body thumped off the vehicle.
A human wailing, of unendurable pain, rose from the front seat: Hae-Joo held a handcolt

against Xi-Li's head and fired.

What? His own man? Why?
Unanimity dumdums combine kalodoxalyn and stimulin. Kalo-doxalyn is a poison that fries the victim in agony, so his screams give his position away; stimulin prevents him from losing consciousness. Xi-Li slumped over into a fetal position. Hae-Joo Im the cheerful postgrad I had known was gone, so thoroly that I wondered now if he had ever really been there. Rain and wind blew in. Mr. Chang drove at hi speed down a garbage alley barely wider than the ford, ripping out drainpipes. He slowed as he joined the campus perimeter road. Ahead were red-and-blue flashes at the campus gates. A hovering aero thrashed the trees, sweeping the traffic with a searchlite; loudspeakers gave incoherent orders to who knew whom. Mr. Chang warned us to brace, killed the engine, and swerved off the road. The ford bucked; its roof whacked my head; somehow Hae-Joo wedged me under him. The ford gathered speed, weight, and weightlessness. The final drop shook free an earlier memory of blackness, inertia, gravity of being trapped in another ford. Where was it? Who was it?
Bamboo splintered, metal tore, my ribs slammed the floor.
Silence, finally. The ford was dead. Next, I heard insect songs, rain on leaves, followed by urgent whispers drawing near. I was crushed under Hae-Joo; he stirred, groaning. I was bruised but unbroken. Needlelite hurt my eyes. An outside voice hissed, "Commander Im?" Mr. Chang responded first: "Get this door open." Hands lifted us out. Xi-Li's body was left where it lay. I glimpsed a succession of anxious faces, resolute faces, faces that rarely slept: a company of Unionmen. I was carried into a concrete shack and lowered down a manhole. "Don't worry," Hae-Joo told me, "I'm right here." My hands gripped rusty rungs; my knees scraped along a short tunnel. More arms lifted me into a mechanic's shop, then lowered me into a smart two-seater xec ford. I heard more orders issued, then Hae-Joo swung in and started the engine. Mr. Chang had disappeared once again. Ahead, garage doors jerked open. Next, I remember gentle rain, suburb back-lanes, then a jammed thruway The fords around us held lonely commuters, couples on dates, small families, some placid, some rowdy. When Hae-Joo

spoke, finally, his voice was cold. "If a dumdum ever scratches me, euthanaze me as quickly as I did Xi-Li." I had no response. "You must have a hundred questions, Sonmi. I beg your patience a little longer—if we are captured now, believe me, the less you know the better. We have a busy nite ahead of us. First, we're paying a visit to Huamdonggil." Do you know that zone of the conurb, Archivist?

My ministry would xpel me if I were ever Eyed in that untermensch slum. But please describe it for my orison.

Huamdonggil is a noxious maze of low, crooked ramshacks, flophouses, pawnshops, drug bars, and comfort hives, covering perhaps five square miles southeast of Old Seoul Transit Station. Its streets are too narrow for fords to enter; its alleys reek of waste and sewage. ShitCorp goes nowhere near that quarter. Hae-Joo left the ford in a lockup and warned me to keep my head hooded: fabricants stolen here end up in brothels, made serviceable after clumsy surgery. Purebloods slumped in doorways, skin enflamed by prolonged xposure to the city's scalding rain. One boy lapped water from a puddle on his hands and knees. "Migrants with enceph or leadlung," Hae-Joo told me. "Hospitals drain their Souls until they've got only enough dollars for a euthanasia jab— or a ride to Huamdonggil. These poor bastards made the wrong choice."

I could not understand why migrants fled Production Zones for such a squalid fate. Hae-Joo listed malaria, flooding, drought, rogue crop genomes, parasites, encroaching deadlands, and a natural desire to better the lives of their children. Papa Song Corp, he assured me, seems humane if compared to factories these migrants ran away from. Traffickers promise it rains dollars in the Twelve Cities, and migrants yearn to believe it; the truth never filters back, for traffickers operate only one way. Hae-Joo steered me away from a meowing two-headed rat. "They bite."

I asked why the Juche tolerates this in its second capital.

Every conurb, my guide answered, has a chemical toilet where the city's unwanted human waste disintegrates quietly, but not quite invisibly. It motivates the downstrata: "Work, spend, work," say slums like Huamdonggil, "or you, too, will end your life *here.*" Moreover, entrepreneurs take advantage of the legal vaccuum to erect ghoulish pleasurezones for upstrata bored with more respectable quarters. Huamdonggil can thus pay its way in taxes and bribes. MediCorp opens a weekly clinic for dying untermensch to xchange any healthy body parts they may have for a sac of eu-thanaze. OrganiCorp has a lucrative contract with the city to send in a daily platoon of immune-genomed fabricants, similar to disas-termen, to mop up the dead before the flies hatch. Hae-Joo then told me to stay silent; we had reached our destination.

Which was where xactly?

Xactly I cannot say: Huamdonggil is not gridnumbered or charted. It was an overhanging mah-jongg house with a high lintel to keep the drainwater out, but I doubt I could identify the building again. Hae-Joo knocked on a reinforced door; an eyehole blinked, bolts unclacked, and a doorman opened up. The doorman's bodyarmor was stained dark and his iron bar lethal looking; he grunted at us to wait for Ma Arak Na. I wondered if he wore a fabricant's collar under his neckplate.

A smoky corridor bent out of view, walled with paper screens. I heard mah-jongg tiles, smelled feet, watched xotically clad pure-blood servers carry trays of drinks. Their hassled xpressions morphed to girly delite every time they slid open a paper screen. I copied Hae-Joo's xample and removed my nikes, dirtied by the Huamdonggil alleyways.

"Well, *you* wouldn't be here if the news wasn't bad." The speaker addressed us from the

ceiling hatch; whether her webbed lips, crescent eyes, and thorny voice were the results of genoming or mutation, I could not guess. Her gem-warted fingers gripped the hatch ridge. Hae-Joo addressed Ma Arak Na as Madam. A cell had turned cancerous, he updated her, Mephi was under arrest, Xi-Li was dumdummed and killed, so yes, the news could hardly be worse.

Ma Arak Na's double tongue uncurled and curled once or twice; she asked how far the cancer had spread. The Unionman replied he was here to answer that very question. The madam of the establishment told us to proceed to the parlor without delay

The parlor?

A gaproom behind a roaring kitchen and a false wall, lit by a weak solar. A cup of ruby lime waited on the rim of a cast-iron brazier that surely predated the building if not the city We sat on well-worn floor cushions. Hae-Joo sipped the drink and told me to un-hood. The planked ceiling thumped and creaked, a hatch flipped open, and Ma Arak Na's face appeared. She xpressed no surprise at seeing me, a Sonmi. Next, the ancient brazier hummed with xtremely modern circuitry. A sphere of dark sheen and refracted silence xpanded until it filled the parlor, aquifying the kitchen noises. Lastly, a piebald light above the brazier morphed into a carp.

A carp?

A carp, as in the fish. A numinous, pearl-and-tangerine, fungus-blotted, mandarin-whiskered, half-meter-long carp. One lazy slap of its tail propelled the fish toward me. Roots of water lilies parted as it moved. Its ancient eyes read mine; its lateral fins rippled. The carp sank a few centimeters to read my collar, and I heard my name spoken by an old man. Hae-Joo was barely visible through the murky underwater air.

"I am sorely thankful to see you alive"—the 3-D's transceived voice was cultured but muffled and splintered—"and truly honored to meet you. I am An-Kor Apis of Union." The fish apologized for the visual dramatics; camouflage was necessary since Unanimity was combing all transmissions.

I responded that I understood.

An-Kor Apis promised I should understand much more very soon and swung toward Hae-Joo. "Commander Im."

Hae-Joo bowed, reporting that he had euthanazed Xi-Li.

The senior Unionman said he already knew, that no anesthetic xisted for Hae-Joo's pain; but that Unanimity had killed Xi-Li, and Hae-Joo had merely spared his brother an ignoble death in a prison cube. Apis then xhorted Hae-Joo to ensure Xi-Li's sacrifice was not in vain. A short briefing followed: six cells had been compromised and twelve more firebreaked. The "good news" was that Boardman Mephi had managed to suicide before neuro-torture could began. An-Kor Apis then ordered my companion to xit me from Seoul thru West Gate One, to proceed to the northern camp in a convoy, and to reflect well upon what had been advised. The carp circled, vanishing into the parlor wall before reappearing thru my chest. "You have chosen your friends wisely, Sonmi. Together, we may change corpocratic civilization out of all recognition." He promised we would meet again soon. The sphere then shrank back into the brazier as the parlor restored itself. The carp became a streak of lite, a dot, finally, nothing at all.

How was Hae-Joo planning to pass thru a city xit without Souls?

The Soul implanter was ushered in just minutes later. A slite, anonymous-looking man, he xamined Hae-Joo's torn finger with professional disdain. He tweezered the tiny egg from his gelpack, bedded it into fresh tissue, and sprayed cutane over the top. That such an insignificant-looking dot can confer all the rights of con-sumerdom on its bearers yet condemn the rest of corpocracy to servitude seemed, and seems still, a bizarre obscenity to me. "Your name is Ok-

Kyun Pyo," the implanter told Hae-Joo, adding that any sony would download his fictional history

The implanter turned to me and produced a pair of laser pliers. They would cut steel but not even scratch living tissue, he assured me. First he removed my collar: I heard a click, felt a tickling as it pulled away, then it was in my hands. That felt odd: as if you were to hold your own umbilical cord, Archivist. "Now for the subcutaneous bar code." He swabbed anesthetic over my throat, warning me this *would* hurt, but his tool's damper would stop the bar code from xploding on contact with air.

"Ingenious." Hae-Joo peered.

"Of course it's ingenious," retorted the implanter. "I designed it myself. Sickening thing is, I can't patent it." He had Hae-Joo stand ready with a cloth; a jagged pain tore my throat. As Hae-Joo stanched the bleeding, the implanter showed me the old identity of Sonmi~451, a microchip in a pair of tweezers. He would dispose of it himself, he promised, carefully. He sprayed healant over my wound and applied a skin-tone dressing. "And now," he continued, "a crime so novel it doesn't even have a name. The Souling of a fab-ricant. How is my genius rewarded? A fanfare? A nobel and a university sinecure?"

"A paragraph in the history of the struggle against corpocracy," said Hae-Joo.

"Wow, thanks, brother," replied the implanter. "A whole paragraph." This surgery was swift also. The man laid my right palm on a cloth, sprayed coag and anesthetic onto my index fingerpad, made an incision less than a centimeter, inserted a Soul, and applied cu-tane. This time his cynicism betrayed a core of sincerity "May your Soul bring you fortune in your promised land, Sister Yun-Ah Yoo." I thanked him. I had all but forgotten Ma Arak Na watching from her ceiling hatch, but now she spoke. "Sister Yoo best get a new face for her new Soul, or some awkward questions'll crop up between here and the promised land."

So I suppose your next destination was the facescaper?

It was. The doorman escorted us as far as Toegyero Street, Huam-donggil's boundary with its nearest semirespectable neighborhood. We metroed to a once fashionable galleria in Shinch'on and escala-tored up thru chiming chandeliers. They took us to a warrenlike precinct on canopy level, frequented only by consumers quite sure of their destination. Twists and turns were lined with discreet entrances and cryptic nameplates; down a dead end, a tiger lily bloomed in a niche by a plain door. "Don't speak," Hae-Joo warned me, "this woman's prickles need cosseting." He rang the bell.

The tiger lily striped brite; it asked us what we wanted.

Hae-Joo said we had an appointment with Madam Ovid.

The flower flexed to peer at us and told us to wait.

The door slid open. "*I* am Madam Ovid," announced a bone-white pureblood. Dewdrugs had frozen her harsh beauty in its mid-twenties, long ago; her voice was a buzz saw. "*You* have no appointment, whoever you are. This is an upstrata establishment. My biocosmeticians accept only recommendations. Try a 'maskgrafter' on one of the lower floors."

The door shut in our faces.

Hae-Joo cleared his throat and spoke into the tiger lily "Kindly inform the estimable Madam Ovid that Lady Heem-Young sends her earnest, cordial regards."

A pause ensued. The tiger lily blushed and asked if we had traveled far.

Hae-Joo completed the code. "Travel far enough, you meet yourself."

The door opened, but Madam Ovid's disdain remained. "Who can argue with Lady Heem-Young?" She ordered us to follow, no dawdling. After a minute of curtained corridors tiled with lite-and-sound absorbers, a silent male assistant joined us from thin air, and a door opened

into a briter studio. Our voices returned. Tools of the facescaper's trade gleamed in the sterile solar. Madam Ovid asked me to unhood. Like Madam Ma Arak Na, she did not evince surprise; I doubt a lady of her stratum had ever set foot in a Papa Song dinery Madam Ovid asked how long the treatment was to last. When Hae-Joo told her we had to leave in ninety minutes, our hostess lost her needle-sharp sangfroid. "Why not do the job yourself with gum and lipstick? Does Lady Heem-Young take Tiger Lily for a discount troweler's with before-and-after kodaks in the window?"

Hae-Joo hastened to xplain we were not xpecting the full morph, only cosmetic adapts to fool an Eye or a casual glance. He admitted ninety minutes was a ludicrously short time, hence Lady Heem-Young needed the best of the best. The proud facescaper saw his flattery but was not immune. "It is true," she boasted, "that nobody, *nobody,* sees the face within the face as I do."

Madam Ovid angled my jaw, saying she could alter my skin, color, hair, lids, and brows. "Eyes we *must* dye a pureblood color." Dimples could be punched in, and my cheekbones muted. She promised to make the best of our eighty-nine precious minutes.

So what happened to Madam Ovid's artistry? You look like a Sonmi fresh from the wombtank.

Unanimity refaced me for my peaktime courtroom appearances. A star actress must look the part. But I assure you, when I xited the Tiger Lily, buzzing with face-ache, not even Seer Rhee would have known me. My ivory irises were hazeled, my eyes lengthened, my follicles ebonized. Consult the kodaks taken at my arrest if you are curious.

Madam Ovid did not say good-bye. Outside, a golden boy with a red balloon waited by the escalator. We followed him to a busy ford park below the galleria. The boy had disappeared, but the balloon was strung on the wiper of a cross-country vehicle. This we drove down Thruway One for the East Gate One.

East *Gate One? The Union leader—Apis—had ordered you west.*

Yes, but the leader had also suffixed his orders with "reflect well upon what had been advised," meaning "invert these orders." Thus, west meant east, north meant south, "travel in a convoy" meant "travel alone."

That's a dangerously simple crypto, it seems to me.

Meticulous brains will overlook the simple. As we sped along the thruway, I asked my companion if Hae-Joo Im was a real name or false. The Unionman responded that no names were real for individuals of his calling. The xitway downcurved to the tollgates, and we slowed to a crawl; ahead, each driver in line reached thru the ford window to Eye his Soul. Enforcers were stopping fords for random questioning, worryingly for us. "One in thirty approx," Hae-Joo muttered, "pretty long odds." Our turn at the scanner came. Hae-Joo placed his index on the Eye; a shrill alarm sounded, and the barrier shot down. Fords around us prevented any hope of escape. Hae-Joo hissed at me: "Keep smiling, act vapid!"

An enforcer strode up, jerking his thumb. "Out."

Hae-Joo obeyed, grinning boyishly.

The enforcer demanded a name and destination.

"Oh, uh, Ok-Kyun Pyo." Even Hae-Joo's voice had changed. "Officer. We're, uh, driving to a motel in an outer conurb." Hae-Joo glanced around and did a hand gesture whose lewd meaning I had learned from Boom-Sook and his friends. How far was this motel, the enforcer demanded. Didn't he know it was already past hour twenty-three?

"Motel BangBangYou'reDead, in Yoju." Hae-Joo adopted an idiotic, conspiratorial tone.

“Snug place, reasonable rates, they’d probably let an enforcer sample the facilities gratis. Only thirty minutes in the fast lane, eastbound xit ten.” He promised we could be there before curfew with time to spare.
“What happened to your index finger?”
“Oh, is *that* why the Eye blinked?” Hae-Joo did a stage groan and rambled; he had cut it destoning a natural avocado at his aunt’s house; blood everywhere, only stoneless avocados for *him* from now on, nature was more trouble than it was worth.
The enforcer peered into the ford and ordered me to unhood.
I hoped my fear would come over as coyness.
He asked if my boyfriend talked this much all the time.
I nodded, shyly
Was that why I never spoke?
“Yes, sir,” I said, sure he would recognize me as a Sonmi, “yes, Officer.”
The enforcer told Hae-Joo girls are obedient and demure until they have you married, then they start yacking and never shut up. “Get going,” he said.

Where did you really curfew that nite? Not a seedy motel?
No. We xited the overway at xit two, then forked onto an unlit country lane. A dike of thorned pines hid an industrial field of a hundred-plus units. So close to curfew, our ford was the only vehicle in motion. We parked and crossed a windy forecourt to a concrete bloc signed HYDRA NURSERY CORP. Hae-Joo’s Soul blinked the rollerdoor open.
Inside was not a horticulture unit but a redlit ark, roofing giant tanks. The air was uncomfortably warm and moist. The tangled, stringy broth I saw through the tanks’ viewing windows concealed their contents, for a moment. Then individual limbs and hands came into focus, nascent, identical faces.

Wombtanks?
Yes. We were in a genomics unit. I watched the clusters of embryo fabricants suspended in uterine gel; I was witnessing my own origin, remember. Some slept, some sucked thumbs, some scurried a hand or foot as if digging or running. I asked Hae-Joo, had I been cultivated in that place? Hae-Joo said no, Papa Song’s nursery in Kwangju is five times bigger. The embryos I was looking at had been designed to labor in uranium tunnels under the Yellow Sea. Their saucerlike eyes were genomed for darkness. In fact, they go insane if xposed to brite unfiltered daylite.
The heat soon had Hae-Joo shiny with sweat. “You must need Soap, Sonmi. Our penthouse is this way”

A penthouse? In a fabricant nursery?
The Unionman was fond of irony. Our “penthouse” was a nite-man’s sparse room, a concrete-walled space containing only a water shower, a single cot, a desk, a stack of chairs, a choked aircon, and a broken ping-pong table. Fat pipes throbbed hot across the ceiling. A sonypanel monitored the wombtanks, and a window overlooked the nursery. Hae-Joo suggested I take a shower now as he could not guarantee one tomorrow nite. He strung up a tarp for privacy and built a bed from chairs for himself while I washed my body. A sac of Soap was waiting on the cot with a set of new clothes.

You didn't feel vulnerable, sleeping in the middle of nowhere without even knowing Hae-Joo Im's true name?
I was too toxed. Fabricants stay awake for over twenty hours thanks to Soap, then we drop. When I woke a few hours later, Hae-Joo was snoring on his cloak. I studied a scab of clotted blood on his cheek, scratched as we fled Taemosan. Pureblood skin is so delicate compared to ours. His eyeballs gyred behind their lids; nothing else in the room moved. He may have said Xi-Li's name, or perhaps it was just noise. I wondered which "I" he was when he dreamed. Then I blinked my Soul on Hae-Joo's handsony to learn about my own alias, Yun-Ah Yoo. I was a student genomicist, born Secondmonth 30th in Naju during the Year of the Horse. Father was a Papa Song's aide; Mother a housewife; no siblings … the data onscrolled for tens of pages, hundreds. The curfew faded away. Hae-Joo woke, massaging his temples. "Ok-Kyun Pyo would love a strong cup of starbuck."
I decided the time had come to ask the question that had seized me in the disneyarium. Why had Union paid such a crippling price to protect one xperimental fabricant?

"Ah." Hae-Joo mumbled and picked sleep from his eyes. "Long answer, long journey"

More evasion?
No. He answered as we drove deeper into the country. I shall pré-cis it for your orison, Archivist. Nea So Copros is poisoning itself to death. Its soil is polluted, its rivers lifeless, its air toxloaded, its food supplies riddled with rogue genes. The downstrata cannot buy drugs to counter these privations. Melanoma and malaria belts advance northward at forty kilometers per year. Those Production Zones of Africa and Indonesia that supply Consumer Zones are now 60-plus percent uninhabitable. Corpocracy's legitimacy, its wealth, is drying up. The Juche's rounds of new Enrichment Statutes are sticking band-aids on hemorrhages and amputations. Corpocracy's only strategy is that long favored by bankrupt ideologies: denial. Downstrata purebloods fall into untermensch sinks. Xecs merely watch, parroting Catechism Seven: "A Soul's value is the dollars therein."

But what would be the logic in allowing downstrata purebloods to … end in places like Huamdonggil? As a class? What could replace their labor?
Us. Fabricants. We cost almost nothing to manufacture and have no awkward hankerings for a better, freer life. We conveniently xpire after forty-eight hours without a specialized Soap and so cannot run away We are perfect organic machinery. Do you still maintain there are no slaves in Nea So Copros?

And how did Union aim to xtract these … alleged "ills" of our state?

Revolution.

But as the Boardman's anthem says, Nea So Copros is the world's only rising sun! Pre-Skirmish East Asia was the same chaos of sickly democracies, democidal autocracies, and rampant deadlands that the rest of the world still is! If the Juche had not unified and cordonized the region, we would have backslid to barbarism with the rest of the globe! How can any *rational organization embrace a creed that opposes corpocracy? Not only is it terrorism but it would be suicide*. All rising suns set, Archivist. Our *corpocracy* now smells of senility.

Well, you seem to have embraced Union propaganda wholeheartedly, Sonmi~451.

And I might observe that you have embraced corpocracy propaganda wholeheartedly Archivist.

Did your new friends mention xactly how *Union plans to overthrow a state witha standing pureblood army of 2 million backed by a further 2 million fabricanttroops?*

Yes. By engineering the simultaneous ascension of 6 million fabricants.

Fantasy. Lunacy.

All revolutions are, until they happen, then they are historical inevitabilities.

How could Union possibly achieve this "simultaneous ascension"?
The battlefield, you see, is neuromolecular. A few hundred Union-men in wombtank and Soap plants could trigger these vast numbers of ascensions by adding Suleiman's catalyst into key streams.

What damage could even 10 million—say—ascended fabricants inflict on the most stable state pyramid in the history of civilization?
Who would work factory lines? Process sewage? Feed fish farms? Xtract oil and coal? Stoke reactors? Construct buildings? Serve in dineries? Xtinguish fires? Man the cordon? Fill exxon tanks? Lift, dig, pull, push? Sow, harvest? Now do you begin to see? Purebloods no longer possess these core skills upon which our corpocracy, or any society rests. The real question is, what damage could 6 million ascensions *not* inflict, in combination with cordonlanders and downstrata purebloods such as those in Huamdonggil with nothing to lose?

Unanimity would maintain order. Enforcers aren't all Union agents.

Even Yoona~939 chose death over slavery.

And your role in this … proposed rebellion?
My first role was to provide proof that Suleiman's ascension catalyst worked. This I had done, and still do, simply by not degenerating. The requisite neurochemicals were being synthesized in underground factories thruout the Twelve Cities.
"Your second role," Hae-Joo informed me that morning, "would be ambassadorial." General Apis wished me to act as an interlocutor between Union and the ascending fabricants. To help mobilize them as revolutionaries.

How did you feel about being a figurehead for terrorists?
Trepidation: I was not genomed to alter history, I told my fellow fugitive. Hae-Joo countered that no revolutionary ever was. All Union was asking for now, he urged, was that I did not reject Apis's proposal out of hand.

Weren't you curious about Unions blueprint for the briter tomorrow? How could you know the new order would not give birth to a tyranny worse than the one it xpired? Think of the Bolshevik and Saudi Arabian Revolutions. Think of the disastrous Pentecostalist Coup of North America. Surely a program of incremental reforms, of cautious steps, is the wisest way

to proceed?

You show xtraordinary erudition for an eighth-stratum, Archivist. I wonder if you encountered this dictum first spoken by a twentieth-century statesman: "An abyss cannot be crossed in two steps."

We're circling a contentious core, Sonmi. Let's return to your journey.

We reached Suanbo Plain around hour eleven, via minor routes.Cropdusters strewed clouds of saffron fertilizer, blanking the horizons Xposure to EyeSats worried Hae-Joo, so we took a Timber-Corp plantation track. It had rained during the nite, so pools bogged the dirt track and progress was slow, but we saw no other vehicle. The Norfolk pine–rubberwood hybrids were planted in rank and file and created the illusion that trees were marching past our ford in a billion-strong regiment. I got out only once, when Hae-Joo refilled the exxon tank from a can. The plain had been brite, but inside the plantation even noon was dank, hushed dusk. The sole sound was a sterile wind swishing blunted needles. The trees were genomed to repel bugs and birds, so the stagnant air stunk of insecticide.

The forest left as abruptly as it had arrived, and the topography grew hillier. We traveled east, the Woraksan Range to our south and Ch'ungju Lake spreading north. The lake water stunk of effluent from its salmon net ponds. Crosswater hills displayed mighty corp logos. A malachite statue of Prophet Malthus surveyed a dust bowl. Our track underpassed the Ch'ungju-Taegu-Pusan xpress-way Hae-Joo said we could be in Pusan within two hours if he dared join it, but a slow crawl thru backcountry was safer. Our pot-holed but Eyeless road switchbacked up into the Sobaeksan Mountains.

Hae-Joo Im wasn't trying to get to Pusan in one day?

No. At approx hour seventeen, he hid the ford in an abandoned lumberyard, and we struck out on foot. My first mountain hike fascinated me as much as my first drive thru Seoul. Limestone bulges oozed lichen; fir saplings and mountain ash grew from clefts; clouds scrolled; the breeze was fragrant with natural pollen; once genomed moths spun around our heads, electronlike. Their wings' logos had mutated over generations into a chance syllabary: a small victory of nature over corpocracy On an xposed rock shelf, Hae-Joo pointed across a gulf. "See him?" Who? I saw only a rock face.

Keep looking, he said, and from the mountainside emerged the carved features of a cross-legged giant. One slender hand was raised in a gesture of grace. Weaponry and elements had strafed, ravaged, and cracked his features, but his outline was discernible if you knew where to look. I said the giant reminded me of Timothy Cavendish, making Hae-Joo Im smile for the first time in a long while. He said the giant was a deity that offered salvation from a meaningless cycle of birth and rebirth, and perhaps the cracked stonework still possessed a lingering divinity Only the inanimate can be so alive. I suppose QuarryCorp will destroy him when they get around to processing those mountains.

Why did Im take you on this field trip to the middle of nowhere?

Every nowhere is somewhere, Archivist. Past the cross-legged giant and over the ridge we came upon a modest grain bed in a clearing, clothes drying on bushes, vegetable plots, a crude irrigation system of bamboo, a cemetery. A thirsty cataract. Hae-Joo led me thru a narrow cleft into a courtyard, walled by ornate buildings unlike any I ever saw. A very recent xplosion had cratered the flagstones, blown away timbers, and collapsed a tiled roof. One pagoda had succumbed to a typhoon and fallen on its twin. Ivy more than joinery kept the latter upright.

This was to be our lodging for the nite, Hae-Joo told me. An abbey had stood there for fifteen centuries, until corpocracy dissolved the pre-consumer religions after the Skirmishes. Now the site serves to shelter dispossessed purebloods who prefer scraping a life from the mountainside to downstrata conurb life.

So Union hid its interlocutor, its … messiah, in a colony of recidivists?

Messiah: what a grandiose title for a Papa Song server. Behind us, a creased, sun-scorched peasant woman, as visibly aged as a senior from Cavendish's time, limped into the courtyard, leaning on an enceph-scarred boy. The boy, a mute, smiled shyly at Hae-Joo, and the woman hugged Hae-Joo affectionately as a mother. I was introduced to the Abbess as Ms. Yoo. One eye was milk-blind, her other brite and watchful. She clasped my hands in hers in a charming gesture. "You are welcome here," she told me, "most welcome."

Hae-Joo asked about the bomb crater.

The Abbess replied that a local Unanimity regiment was using them for teething. An aero appeared last month and launched a shell without warning. One man died, and several colonists were badly injured. An act of malice, the Abbess speculated sadly, or a bored pilot, or perhaps a developer had seen potential in the site as a healthspa hotel for xecs and wanted the site cleared.

My companion promised to find out.

Who were these "colonists" xactly? Squatters? Terrorists? Union?

Each colonist had a different story. I was introduced to Uyghur dissidents, dust-bowled farmers from Ho Chi Minh Delta, once respectable conurb dwellers who had fallen foul of corp politics, unemployable deviants, those undollared by mental illness. Of the seventy-five colonists, the youngest was nine weeks old; the oldest, the Abbess, was sixty-eight, though if she had claimed to be three hundred years of age I would still have believed her, such gravitas she had.

But … how could people there survive without franchises and gallerias? What did they eat? Drink? How about electricity? Entertainment? What about enforcers and order? How did they impose hierarchy?

Go visit them, Archivist. You can tell the Abbess I sent you. No? Well, their food came from the forest and gardens, water from the cataract. Scavenge trips to landfills yielded plastics and metals for tools. Their "school" sony was powered by a water turbine. Solar nitelamps recharged during daylite hours. Their entertainment was themselves; consumers cannot xist without 3-D and AdV, but humans once did and still can. Enforcement? Problems arose, no doubt, even crises from time to time. But no crisis is insuperable if people cooperate.

What about the mountain winters?

They survived as fifteen centuries of nuns had before them: by planning, thrift, and fortitude. The monastery was built over a cave, xtended by bandits during the Japanese annexation. These tunnels gave sufficient shelter from winter and Unanimity aeros. Oh, such a life is no bucolic Utopia. Yes, winters are severe; rainy seasons are relentless; crops fall prey to disease; their medicine is sorely limited. Few colonists live as long as upstrata consumers. They bicker, blame, and grieve as people will, but at least they do it in a community and companionship is a fine medicine in itself. Nea So Copros has no communities now, only mutually suspicious

substrata. I slept soundly that nite against a backdrop of gossip, music, complaints, and laughter, feeling safe for the first time since my dormroom in Papa Song's.

So what was Union's interest in the colony?

Simple: Union provides hardware, such as their solars; in return, the colony provides a safe house, kilometers from the nearest Eye. I woke in my dorm tunnel just before dawn and crept to the temple mouth. The guard was a middle-aged woman nursing a colt and a stimulin brew; she lifted the mosquito net for me but warned me about coyotes scavenging below the monastery walls. I promised to stay in earshot, skirted the courtyard, and squeezed between the narrow rocks to the balcony of blacks and grays.

The mountain dropped away; an updraft rose from the valley, carrying animal cries, calls, growls, and snuffles. I could not identify even one; for all my knowledge of censored arcana, I felt impoverished. And such a sky of stars! Ah, mountain stars are not these apologetic pinpricks over conurb skies; hanging plump they drip lite. A boulder stirred, just a meter away.

"Ah, Ms. Yoo," said the Abbess, "an early riser."

I wished her a good morning.

The younger colonists, the old woman confided, worry about her wandering around before sunup, in case she fell off the edge. She produced a pipe from her sleeve, stuffed its bowl, and lit it. A raw local leaf, she admitted, but she had lost the taste for refined marlboros years ago. The smoke smelled of aromatic leather and dried dung.

I asked about the stone figure in the escarpment across the gulf.

Siddhartha had other names, she told me, mostly lost now. Her predecessors knew all the stories and sermons, but the old Abbess and senior nuns were sentenced to the Litehouse when non-consumer religions were criminalized. The present Abbess had been a novice back then, so Unanimity judged her young enough for reorientation. She was raised in an orphans' bloc in Pearl City Conurb, but she said, she had never left her abbey spiritually. She returned years later and founded the present colony in the wreckage.

I asked if Siddhartha was indeed a god.

Many called him so, the Abbess agreed, but Siddhartha does not influence fortune or weather or perform many of a divinity's traditional functions. Rather, Siddhartha is a dead man and a living ideal. The man taught about overcoming pain, and influencing one's future reincarnations. "But I pray to the ideal." She indicated the meditating giant. "Early, so he knows I'm serious."

I said I hoped that Siddhartha would reincarnate me in her colony.

Lite from the coming day defined the world more clearly now. The Abbess asked why I hoped so.

It took a little time to form my answer. I said how all pure-bloods have a hunger, a dissatisfaction in their eyes, xcept for the colonists I had met.

The Abbess nodded. If consumers found fulfillment at any meaningful level, she xtemporized, corpocracy would be finished. Thus, Media is keen to scorn colonies such as hers, comparing them to tapeworms; accusing them of stealing rainwater from Wa-terCorp, royalties from VegCorp patent holders, oxygen from Air-Corp. The Abbess feared that, should the day ever come when the Board decided they were a viable alternative to corpocratic ideology, "the 'tapeworms' will be renamed 'terrorists,' smart bombs will rain, and our tunnels flood with fire."

I suggested the colony must prosper invisibly, in obscurity

"Xactly" Her voice hushed. "A balancing act as demanding as impersonating a pureblood, I imagine."

She knew you weren't pureblood all along? How?

It seemed tactless to ask. Maybe a spyhole in our quarters had captured me imbibing Soap. My host informed me that xperience had taught the colonists to keep a friendly eye on their guests, even Unionmen. The Abbess herself disliked such a violation of the old abbeys hospitality codes, but the younger colonists were adamant that close surveillance be maintained. She revealed her intelligence only to bid me luck in my future enterprises, for of all corpocracy's crimes against the downstrata, the Abbess stated, "nothing is more heinous than the enslavement of your tribe."

I presume she meant fabricants? But was she speaking in specific terms—servers in dineries—or general terms—every fabricant in Nea So Copros?

I did not know, and did not learn that until the following nite in Pusan. But by now breakfast pans were banging in the courtyard. The Abbess looked at the cleft to the courtyard and changed her tone. "And who might this young coyote be?"

The mute boy padded over and sat by the Abbess's feet. Sunlite bent around the world, lending fragile color to wildflowers.

So day two as a fugitive got under way.

Yes. Hae-Joo breakfasted on potato cakes and fig honey; unlike the previous nite, no one pressed me to eat the pureblood food. As we said our farewells, two or three of the teenage girls, tearful to see Hae-Joo depart, shot me hateful glances, much to my guide's amusement. Hae-Joo had to behave like a hard-bitten revolutionary, but he was still a boy in some respects. As she embraced me, the Abbess whispered in my ear, "I shall ask Siddhartha to grant your wish." Under his gaze we left that rarefied height and hiked down through the noisy forest, where we found our ford, untouched.

Progress toward Yongju was fair. We passed upbound timber rigs driven by burly same-stem fabricants. But the rice plain north of Andongho Lake is laced with xposed timber tracks, so we stayed inside the ford most of the day, hidden from EyeSats until hour fifteen or so.

Crossing an old suspension bridge above Chuwangsan River, we got out to stretch our legs. Hae-Joo apologized for his pure-blood bladder and pissed into the trees two hundred meters below. Over the other side, I studied the monochrome parrots who roost there on guano-stained chasm ledges; their flapping and honking reminded me of Boom-Sook Kim and his xec friends. A ravine wound upstream; downstream, the Chuwangsan River was channeled thru leveled hills before disappearing under Ulsong's canopy for sewage duty. Aeros clustered over the conurb: black-and-silver dots.

The bridge cables groaned under the strain of a gleaming xec ford, without warning. It was an xpensive auto to encounter on such a rustic road, suspiciously so. Hae-Joo reached into our ford for his colt. He returned to me, hand in his jacket pocket, murmuring, "Let me do any talking, and get ready to dive down."

Sure enough, the xec ford slowed to a stop. A stocky man with a facescaped sheen swiveled out from the driver's seat with a friendly nod. "Beautiful afternoon."

Hae-Joo nodded back, observing it was not too sultry.

A pureblood woman unfolded her legs from the passenger door. Her thick wraparounds revealed only a pixie nose and sensual lips. She leaned on the opposite railing, with her back to us, and lit a marlboro. The driver opened the ford trunk and lifted out an air-box, one suitable for transporting a medium-size dog. He unlocked its clickers and lifted out a striking, perfectly formed, but tiny female form, about thirty centimeters in height; she mewled, terrified, and tried

to wriggle free. When she caught sight of us her miniature, wordless scream became imploring. Before we could do or say anything, the man swung her off the bridge, by her hair, and watched her fall. He made a plopping noise with his tongue when she hit the rocks below and chuckled. "Cheap riddance"—he grinned at us—"to *very* xpensive trash."
I forced myself to remain silent. Sensing the effort this cost, Hae-Joo touched my arm. One scene from the Cavendish Disney when a pureblood gets thrown off a balcony by a criminal, replayed itself in my head.

I presume he had discarded a fabricant living doll.
Yes. The xec was keen to tell us all about it. "The Zizzi Hikaru Doll was the *must-have* the Sextet before last. My daughter didn't give me a *moment's* rest. Of course, my official wife"—he nodded at the woman on the other side of the bridge—"put *her* all in, morning, noon, and nite. 'How am I supposed to look our neighbors in their faces if our daughter is the *only girl* in our carousel to *not* have a Zizzi?' You got to admire the marketers of these things. One junky toy fabricant, but genome it like some glitzy antique idol and up goes its price *by fifty thousand;* that's *before* you shell out for designer-ware, dollhouse, accessories. So what did I do? I paid for the damn thing, just to shut the women up! Four months later, what happens? Teencool surfs on and Marilyn Monroe dethrones poor, passé Zizzi." He told us, digustedly that a registered fabricant xpirer cost three thousand dollars, but—the man jerked a thumb over the railing—an accidental plunge comes free. So why chuck good dollars after bad? "Pity"—he winked at Hae-Joo—"divorces aren't as hitchless, eh?"
"I heard that, Fat-Ass!" His wife still did not deign to face us. "You should have taken the doll back to the franchise and had your Soul redollared. Our Zizzi was defective. It couldn't even sing. The damn thing bit me."
Fat-Ass replied, sweetly, "Can't imagine why *that* didn't kill it, darlingest." His wife muttered a casual obscenity while her husband ran his eyes over my body and asked Hae-Joo if we were vacationing near that remote spot or passing thru on business.
"Ok-Kyun Pyo, sir, at your service." Hae-Joo gave a slite bow and introduced himself as a fifth-stratum aide in Eagle Accountancy Franchise, a minor corp division.
The xec's curiosity died. "That so? I manage the Golf Coast between P'yonghae and Yongdok. You are a golfer, Pyo? No? *No?* Golf isn't just a game y know, golf is a career advantage!" The Paegam course, he promised, has an all-weather fifty-four holer, lickable greens, lake features like the Beloved Chairman's famous water gardens. "We outbid the local downstrata for the aquifer. Normally you can't get membership for love nor money unless you're a seer, but I like you, Pyo, so just mention my name to our membership people: Seer Kwon."
Ok-Kyun Pyo gushed gratitude.
Pleased, Seer Kwon began telling his xec life story, but his wife tossed her marlboro after the Zizzi Hikaru, climbed into the ford, and kept her hand on the horn for ten seconds. Zebra-feathered parrots cannonaded skyward. The xec gave Hae-Joo a rueful grin and advised him to pay the xtra dollars to conceive a son when he gets married. As he drove off I wished for his ford to plunge off the bridge.

You considered him a murderer?

Of course. One so shallow, moreover, he did not even know it.

But hate men like Seer Kwon, and you hate the whole world.
Not the whole world, Archivist, only the corpocratic pyramid that permits fabricants to be

killed so wantonly, casually.

When did you finally reach Pusan?

Nitefall. Hae-Joo pointed at exxon clouds from Pusan refinery, turning melon pink to anthracite gray, and told me we had arrived. We entered Pusan's northern rim on an unEyed farmtrack. Hae-Joo deposited the ford at a lockup in Somyon suburb, and we took the metro to Ch'oryang Square. It was smaller than Chongmyo Plaza but as busy, and strange after the silent emptiness of the mountains. Fabricant nannies scooted after their xec charges; swan-ning couples assessed couples swanning; corp-sponsored 3-Ds competed to outdazzle all the others. In a tatty back-galleria an old-style festival was taking place where hawkers sold palm-size curios, "friends for life": toothless crocs, monkey chicklets, jonahwhales in jars. Hae-Joo told me these pets are an old cheapjack's ruse; they die forty-eight hours after you get them home, invariably A circus-man was touting for business through a megaphone: "Marvel at the Two-Headed Schizoid Man! Gaze upon Madame Matryoshka and Her Pregnant Embryo! Gasp in Horror at the Real, Live Merican— but don't poke your fingers into his cage!" Pureblood sailors from all over Nea So Copros sat in frontless bars, flirting with topless comforters, under the scrutiny of PimpCorp men: leathery Hi-malayans, Han Chinese, pale-hued hairy Baikalese, bearded Uzbeks, wiry Aleutians, coppery Viets and Thais. Comfort houses' AdVs promised satisfaction for every peccadillo a hungry pure-blood could imagine. "If Seoul is a Boardman's faithful spouse," said Hae-Joo, "Pusan is his no-pantied mistress."

Backstreets grew narrower. A funneled wind bowled bottles and cans along, and hooded figures hurried by. Hae-Joo led me through a surreptitious doorway, up a glimlit tunnel to a port-cullised entrance. KUKJE MANSIONS was inscribed over a side window. Hae-Joo pressed a buzzer. Dogs barked, the blind upzipped, and a pair of identical saber-tooths slavered at the glass. An unshaven woman hauled them aside and peered at us. Her gemwarted face lit with recognition at Hae-Joo and xclaimed: "Nun-Hel Han! It's been nearly twelve months! Little wonder, if the rumors about your brawls were even half true! How were the Philippines?"

Hae-Joo's voice had changed again. I checked, involuntarily, so hard-scoured was his accent now; it was still him at my side. "Sinking, Mrs. Lim, sinking fast. You haven't gone subletting my room, now, have you?"

"Oh, I keep a reliable house, don't worry about that!" She faked offense but warned she would need a fresh blip of dollars if his next voyage lasted as long as his last. The portcullis rose, and she glanced at me. "Say, Nun-Hel, if your fluffball stays over a week, single apartments get charged as doubles. House rules. Like it or lump it. All the same to me."

Nun-Hel Han the sailor said I would stay for only a nite or two.

"In every port"—the landlady leered—"it's true, then."

Was she Union?

No. Flophouse landladies judas their own mothers for a dollar; ju-dasing a Unionman would fetch a far higher price. But, as Hae-Joo told me, they also discourage the idly inquisitive. Inside, a pocked stairwell echoed with arguments and 3-Ds. I was, at last, getting used to stairs. On the ninth floor a woodworm corridor led us to a scraped door. Hae-Joo retrieved a pre-placed match stump from its hinge, noting the management had succumbed to a nasty rash of honesty

Nun-Hel's floproom had a sour mattress, a tidy kitchenette, a closet of clothes for varying climates, a blurred foto of naked Caucasian prostitutes straddling a group of sailors, souvenirs from the Twelve Conurbs and minor ports, and of course, a framed kodak of the Beloved Chairman. A lipsticked marlboro was left teetered on a beer can. The window was shuttered.

Hae-Joo showered and changed. He told me he had to attend a Union cell meeting and warned me to keep the window shutter down and not to answer the door or fone unless it was him or Apis with this crypto: he wrote the words "These are the tears of things" on a scrap of paper, which he then burned in the ashtray. He put a small supply of Soap in the fridge, and promised to return in the morning, soon after curfew.

Surely, such a distinguished defector as yourself deserved a rather grander reception?
Grand receptions draw attention. I passed some hours studying Pusan's geography on the sony before showering and imbibing my Soap. I woke late, I think, after hour six. Hae-Joo returned xhausted, holding a bag of pungent *ttōkbukgi*. I made him a cup of starbuck, which he drank gratefully, then ate his breakfast. "Okay, Sonmi—stand by the window and cover your eyes." I obeyed. The rusty shutter uprolled. Hae-Joo commanded, "Don't look … don't look … now, open your eyes."
A swarm of roofs, thruways, commuter hives, AdVs, concrete … and there, in the background, the brite spring sky's sediment had sunk to a dark band of blue. Ah, it mesmerized me … like the snow had done. All the woe of the words "I am" seemed dissolved there, painlessly, peacefully

Hae-Joo announced, "The ocean."

You'd never seen it before?
Only on Papa Song's 3-Ds of life in Xultation. Never the real thing with my own eyes. I yearned to go and touch it and walk by it, but Hae-Joo thought it safest to stay hidden during daylite until we were requartered somewhere more remote. Then he lay on the mattress and within a minute began snoring.
Hours passed; in ocean slots between buildings, I watched freighters and naval vessels. Downstrata housewives aired worn linen on nearby rooftops. Later the weather grew overcast, and armored aeros rumbled thru low clouds. I studied. It rained. Hae-Joo, still asleep, rolled over, slurred "No, only a friend of a friend," and fell silent again. Drool slid from his mouth, wetting his pillow. I thought about Professor Mephi. In our last seminar he had spoken of his estrangement from his family and confessed he spent more time educating me than teaching his own daughter. Now he was dead, because of his belief in Union. I felt gratitude, guilt, and other emotions too.
Hae-Joo woke midafternoon, showered, and brewed ginseng tea. How I envy purebloods your rainbow cuisine, Archivist. Before my ascension, Soap seemed the most delicious substance imaginable, but now it tastes bland and gray. I suffer nausea if I so much as taste pureblood food, however, and vomiting later. Hae-Joo downshuttered the window. "Time to liaise," he told me. Then he unhooked the Beloved Chairman's kodak and placed it facedown on the low table. Hae-Joo inplugged his sony to a socket concealed in the blemished frame.

An illegal transceiver? Hidden in a kodak of Nea's architect?
The sacred is a fine hiding place for the profane. A 3-D of an old man clarified britely; he looked like an inxpensively healed burn victim. His lips out of sync with his words, he congratulated me on my safe arrival in Pusan and asked who had the prettier face, him or the carp?
I replied honestly: the carp.
An-Kor Apis's laugh became a cough. "This is my true face, whatever that means these days." His sickly appearance suited him well, he said, because casual enforcers worried that he might

be contagious. He asked if I had enjoyed my journey across our beloved motherland.
Hae-Joo Im had looked after me well, I answered.
General Apis asked if I understood the role Union wished me to assume in their struggle to ascend fabricants into citizens. Yes, I began, but I did not have the chance to declare my indecision. "We want to xpose you to a … sight, a formative xperience, here in Pusan, before you decide, Sonmi." He warned it would not be pleasant but was imperative. "To allow for an informed decision regarding your future. If you agree, Hae-Joo can take you now."
I said I would go, certainly.
"Then we'll speak again, very soon," promised Apis, disconnecting his imager. Hae-Joo produced a pair of technic uniforms and semi-visors from his closet. We dressed in these, then over-cloaked for the landlady's benefit. Outside was cold, and I was grateful for the double layers. We rode the metro to the port terminal and took a conveyor down to the waterfront berths, passing the vast oceangoing vessels. The nite sea was oily black and the ships similarly austere, but one brite vessel pulsed golden arches and resembled an undersea palace. I had seen it before, in a previous life. "Papa Song's Golden Ark," I xclaimed, telling Hae-Joo what he already knew, that it conveyed the Twelvestarred east across the ocean to Xultation.
Hae-Joo confirmed Papa's Golden Ark was our destination.
Security on the gangway was minimal: a bleary-eyed pureblood with his feet on the desk, watching fabricant gladiators slay each other in the Shanghai Colosseum on 3-D. "And you are?"
Hae-Joo blinked his Soul on his Eye. "Fifth-stratum technic man—Shik Gang." He checked his handsony and reported we had been sent to recalibrate busted thermostats on deck seven.
"Seven?" The guard smirked. "Hope you haven't just eaten." Then he looked at me. I looked at the floor. "Who's this verbal marathonette, Technic Gang?"
"My new aide. Technic Aide Yoo."
"That so? Is tonite your maiden visit to our pleasuredome?"
I nodded yes, it was.
The guard said there was no time like the first time. He waved us by with a lazy twitch of his foot.

Gaining access to a corp ship was so simple?
Papa Song's Golden Ark is not xactly a magnet for illegal boarders, Archivist. Crew, aides, and various technics bustled in the main gangways, too intent on their own business to notice us. The service side shafts were empty so we descended to the Ark's underbelly unmet. Our nikes clanged on the metal stairs. A giant motor drummed. I thought I heard singing but told myself my ears must be mistaken. Hae-Joo consulted his deck plan, unlatched an access hatch, and I remember him pausing, as if to tell me something. But he changed his mind, clambered in, helped me thru, then locked the hatch behind us.
I found myself on all fours on a cramped hangway suspended from the roof of a sizable holding chamber. The hangway's far end was concealed by flaps, but thru its gridded floor I could see some two hundred Twelvestarred Papa Song servers, lining up in a paddock of turnstiles whose single direction was onward. Yoonas, Hwa-Soons, Ma-Leu-Das, Sonmis, and some stem-types unused in Chongmyo Plaza Dinery all in the familiar gold-and-scarlet uniform. How dreamlike to see my x-sisters, outside the context of a Papa Song dome. They sang Papa Song's Psalm, over and over; background hydraulics underbassed that sickening melody. But how jubilant they sounded! Their Investment was paid off. The voyage to Hawaii was under way, and their new life on Xultation would shortly begin.
You sound as if you still envy them.

Watching them from the hangway, I envied their certainty about the future. After about a minute, an aide at the head of the line ushered the next server through golden arches and the sisters clapped. The lucky Twelvestarred waved back at her friends, then passed thru the arch to be shown to her luxury cabin we had all seen on 3-D. The turnstiles rotated the fabricants one space forward. After watching this process several times, Hae-Joo tapped my foot and signaled for me to crawl along the hangway, thru the flap, into the next chamber.

Weren't you in danger of being seen?
No. Brite droplites underswung our hangway, so from the noisy holding pen floor, several meters below, we were invisible. Anyway, we were not intruders but technics conducting maintenance work. The next chamber was in fact a small room, no bigger than this prison cube. The singing and din was damped out; its quiet was eerie. A plastic chair stood on a dais; above this chair, suspended from a ceiling monorail, hung a bulky helmet mechanism. Three smiling aides dressed in Papa Song scarlet guided the server onto the chair. One aide xplained that the helmet would remove her collar, as promised by Papa Song in Matins over the years. "Thank you, Aide," burbled the xcited server. "Oh, thank you!"
The helmet was fitted over the Sonmi's head and neck. It was at this moment I noticed the odd number of doors into the cell.

"Odd" in what way?
There was only one door: the entrance from the holding pen. How had all the previous servers left? A sharp "clack" from the helmet refocused my attention on the dais below. The server's head slumped unnaturally I could see her eyeballs roll back and the cabled spine connecting the helmet mechanism to the monorail stiffen. To my horror, the helmet rose, the server sat upright, then was lifted off her feet into the air. Her corpse seemed to dance a little; her smile of anticipation frozen in death tautened as her facial skin took some of the load. Below, meanwhile, one worker hoovered bloodloss from the plastic chair and another wiped it clean. The monorailed helmet conveyored its cargo parallel to our hangway, through a flap, and disappeared into the next chamber. A new helmet lowered itself over the plastic stool, where the three aides were already seating the next xcited server.
Hae-Joo whispered in my ear. "Those ones you can't save, Sonmi. They were doomed when they boarded." In fact, I thought, they were doomed from their wombtanks.
Another helmet clacked its bolt home. This server was a Yoona.
You understand, I have no words for my emotions at that time.
Finally, I managed to obey Hae-Joo and crawl along the hang-way thru a soundlock into the next chamber. Here, the helmets conveyed the cadavers into a vast violet-lit vault; the space must have accounted for a quarter of Papa Song's Ark's volume. As we entered, the celsius fell sharply and a roar of machines burst our ears. A slaughterhouse production line lay below us, manned by figures wielding scissors, sword saws, and various tools of cutting, stripping, and grinding. The workers were bloodsoaked, from head to toe. I should properly call those workers butchers: they snipped off collars, stripped clothes, shaved follicles, peeled skin, offcut hands and legs, sliced off meat, spooned organs … drains hoovered the blood … The noise, you can imagine, Archivist, was deafening.

But … why would— What would the purpose be of such … carnage?
The economics of corpocracy The genomics industry demands huge quantities of liquefied biomatter, for wombtanks, but most of all, for Soap. What cheaper way to supply this protein

than by recycling fabricants who have reached the end of their working lives? Additionally, leftover "reclaimed proteins" are used to produce Papa Song food products, eaten by consumers in the corp's dineries all over Nea So Copros. It is a perfect food cycle.

What you describe is beyond the … conceivable, Sonmi~451. Murdering fabricants to supply dineries with food and Soap … no. The charge is preposterous, no, it's unconscionable, no, it's blasphemy! As an Archivist I can't deny that you saw what you believe you saw, but as a consumer of the corpocracy, I am impelled to say, what you saw must, must *have been a Union … set, created for your benefit. No such … "slaughtership" could possibly be permitted to xist. The Beloved Chairman would never permit it! The Juche would ionize Papa Song's entire xec strata in the Lite-house! If fabricants weren't paid for their labor in retirement communities, the whole pyramid would be … the foulest perfidy.* Business is business.

You've described not "business" but … industrialized evil!
You underestimate humanity's ability to bring such evil into being. Consider. You have seen the 3-Ds, but have you visited a fabricant retirement village, personally? I shall take your silence as a no. Do you know anyone who has visited one, personally? Again, no. Then where do fabricants go after retirement? Not just servers, the hundreds of thousands of fabricants who end their serviceable lives every year. There should be cities full of them by now. But where are these cities?

No crime of such magnitude could take root in Nea So Copros. Even fabricants have carefully defined rights, guaranteed by the Chairman!
Rights are susceptible to subversion, as even granite is susceptible to erosion. My fifth *Declaration* posits how, in a cycle as old as tribalism, ignorance of the Other engenders fear; fear engenders hatred; hatred engenders violence; violence engenders further violence until the only "rights," the only law, are whatever is willed by the most powerful. In corpocracy, this means the Juche. What is willed by the Juche is the tidy xtermination of a fabricant underclass.

But what about the 3-Ds of Xultation and such? You saw them in the Papa Song's at Chongmyo Plaza yourself There's your proof
Xultation is a sony-generated simulacrum dijied in Neo Edo. It does not xist in the real Hawaii, or anywhere. Indeed, during my final weeks at Papa Song's, it seemed that scenes of Xultation repeated themselves. The same Hwa-Soon ran down the same sandy path to the same rock pool. My unascended sisters did not notice, and I doubted myself at the time, but now I had my xplanation.

Your Testimony must stand as you speak it, despite my protests. I—we must progress…. How long did you watch this slaughter?
I cannot recall, accurately Perhaps ten minutes, perhaps an hour. I remember Hae-Joo leading me thru the dining area, numbly Pure-bloods played cards, ate noodles, smoked, worked at sonys, joked, engaged in ordinary life. How could they know what happened in the underbelly and just … sit there, indifferent? As if it were not living fabricants being processed but pickled sardines? Why did their consciences not scream for this obscenity to end? The bearded security guard winked, saying, "Come back soon, honeysuckle."

In the metro back to the flophouse, as the commuters swayed, I "saw" cadavers on the monorail. Ascending the stairwell, I "saw" them hoisted aloft the xecution room. In his room, Hae-Joo did not switch on the solar; he just raised the shutter a few centimeters to let the lites of Pusan dilute the darkness and poured himself a glass of *soju*. Not a word had passed between us.

I alone, of all my sisters, had seen the true Xultation and lived.

Our sex was joyless, graceless, and necessarily improvised, but it was an act of the living. Stars of sweat on Hae-Joo's back were his gift to me, and I harvested them on my tongue. After, the young man smoked a nervy marlboro in silence and studied my birthmark, curiously. He fell asleep on my arm, squashing it. I did not wake him; the pain turned to numbness, the numbness to pins and needles, then I squirmed out from under him. I spread a blanket over Hae-Joo; purebloods catch rogue colds in all weathers. The city readied itself for curfew. Its smeary glow dimmed as AdVs and lites switched off. The final server of the final line would be dead by now. The processing line would be cleaned and silent. The slaughtermen, if they were fabricants, would be in their dorm-rooms, if purebloods, at home with their families. The Golden Ark would sail away tomorrow to a new port, where the reclamation would begin afresh.

At hour zero I imbibed my Soap and joined Hae-Joo under the blanket, warmed by his body.

Weren't you angry with Union for xposing you to the Golden Ark without adequately preparing you?

What words could Apis or Hae-Joo have used?

Morning brought a sweaty haze. Hae-Joo showered, then devoured a huge bowl of rice, pickled cabbage, eggs, and seaweed soup. I washed up. My pureblood lover sat across the table from me. I spoke for the first time since we entered that protein-xtraction line. "That ship must be destroyed. Every slaughtership in Nea So Copros like it must be sunk."

Hae-Joo said yes.

"The shipyards that build them must be demolished. The systems that facilitated them must be dismantled. The laws that permitted the systems must be torn down and reconstructed."

Hae-Joo said yes.

"Every consumer, xec, and Juche Boardman in Nea So Copros must understand that fabricants *are* purebloods, be they grown in a wombtank or a womb. If persuasion does not work, ascended fabricants must fight with Union to achieve this end, using whatever force is necessary"

Hae-Joo said yes.

"Ascended fabricants need a Catechism, to define their ideals, to harness their anger, to channel their energies. I am the one to compose this declaration of rights. Will—can—Union seedbed such a Catechism?"

Hae-Joo said, "This is what we're waiting for."

Many xpert witnesses at your trial denied Declarations *could be the work of a fabricant, ascended or otherwise, and maintained it was ghosted by Union or a pureblood Abolitionist.*

How lazily "xperts" dismiss what they fail to understand!

I, only I, wrote *Declarations* over three weeks at Ulsukdo Ceo, outside Pusan, in an isolated xec villa overlooking the Nakdong Estuary. During its composition I consulted a judge, a genomicist, a syntaxist, and General An-Kor Apis, but the Ascended Catechisms of *Declarations,* their logic and ethics, denounced at my trial as "the ugliest wickedness in the annals of deviancy," were the fruits of *my* mind, Archivist, fed by the xperiences I have

narrated to you this morning. No one else has lived this life. My *Declarations* were germinated when Yoona~939 was xecuted, nurtured by Boom-Sook and Fang, strengthened by the tutelage of Mephi and the Abbess, birthed in Papa Song's slaughtership.

And your capture came shortly after completing your text?

The same afternoon. Once my function was fulfilled, there was no reason for Unanimity to let me run free. My arrest was dramatized for Media. I handed my *Declarations* on sony to Hae-Joo. We looked at each other for the last time; nothing is as eloquent as nothing. I knew we would never meet again, and maybe he knew that I knew.

At the edge of the property a small colony of wild ducks survive the pollution. Rogue genomes give them a resilience lacking in their pureblood ancestors. I suppose I felt a kinship with them. I fed them bread, watched water walkers dimple the chrome-brite surface, then returned to the house to watch the show from inside. Unanimity did not make me wait long.

Six aeros sharked over the water, one landing on the flower garden. Enforcers jumped out, priming their colts, and belly-snaked toward my window with much hand signing and fearless bravado. I had left the doors and windows open for them, but my captors contrived a spectacular siege with snipers, megaphones, and an xplod-ing wall.

You are implying that you xpected the raid, Sonmi?

Once I had finished my manifesto, the next stage could only be my arrest.

What do you mean? What "next stage" of what?

Of the theatrical production, set up while I was still a server in Papa Song's.

Wait, wait, wait. What about … everything? Are you saying your whole confession is composed of … scripted events?

Its key events, yes. Some actors were unwitting, Boom-Sook and the Abbess, for xample, but the major players were all provocateurs. Hae-Joo Im and Boardman Mephi certainly were. Did you not detect the hairline cracks in the plot?

Such as?

Wing~027 was as stable an ascendant as I: was I really so unique? You yourself suggested, would Union truly risk their secret weapon on a dash across Korea? Did Seer Kwon's murder of the Zizzi Hikaru fabricant on the suspension bridge not underline pure-blood brutality a little too neatly? Was its timing not a little too pat?

But what about Xi-Li, the young pureblood killed on the nite of your fite from Tae-mosan? His blood was not … tomato ketchup!

Indeed not. That poor idealist was an xpendable xtra in Unanimity's disney

But … Union? Are you saying even Union was fictioned for your script?

No. Union prexists me, but its raisons-d'être are not to foment revolution. Firstly, it attracts social malcontents like Xi-Li and keeps them where Unanimity can watch them. Secondly, it provides Nea So Copros with the enemy required by any hierarchical state for social cohesion.

I still can't understand why Unanimity would go to the xpense and trouble of staging this fake … adventure story.
To generate the show trial of the decade. To make every last pure-blood in Nea So Copros mistrustful of every last fabricant. To manufacture downstrata consent for the Juche's new Fabricant Xpiry Act. To discredit Abolitionism. You can see, the whole conspiracy has been a resounding success.

But if you knew about this … conspiracy, why did you cooperate with it? Why did you allow Hae-Joo Im to get so close to you?

Why does any martyr cooperate with his judases?

Tell me.
We see a game beyond the endgame. I refer to my *Declarations,* Archivist. Media has flooded Nea So Copros with my Catechisms. Every schoolchild in corpocracy knows my twelve "blasphemies" now. My guards tell me there is even talk of a statewide "Vigilance Day" against fabricants who show signs of the *Declarations*. My ideas have been reproduced a billionfold.

But to what end? Some … future revolution? It can never succeed.
As Seneca warned Nero: No matter how many of us you kill, you will never kill your successor. Now, my narrative is over. Switch off your silver orison. In two hours enforcers will escort me into the Litehouse. I claim my last request.

… name it.

Your sony and access codes.

What do you wish to download?
A certain disney I once began, one nite long ago in another age.

THE GHASTLY ORDEAL OF TIMOTHY CAVENDISH

"Mr. Cavendish? Are we awake?" A licorice snake on a field of cream wriggles into focus. The number five. November 5. Why does my old John Thomas hurt so? A prank? My God, I have a tube stuck up my willy! I fight to free myself but my muscles ignore me. A bottle up there feeds a tube. The tube feeds a needle in my arm. The needle feeds me. A woman's stiff face framed with a pageboy haircut. "Tut *tut*. Lucky you were here when you fell over, Mr. Cavendish. Very lucky indeed. If we *had* let you go wandering over heaths, youd be dead in a ditch by now!"
Cavendish, a familiar name, Cavendish, who is this "Cavendish"? Where am I? I try to ask her, but I can only squeal, like Peter Rabbit tossed off Salisbury Cathedral's spire. Blackness

embraces me. Thank God.

A number six. November 6. I've woken here before. A picture of a thatched cottage. Text in Cornish or Druidic. The willy tube is gone. Something stinks. Of what? My calves are raised and my arse is wiped with a brisk, cold, wet cloth. Excrement, feces, cloying, clogging, smearing … poo. Did I sit on a tube of the stuff? Oh. No. How did I come to this? I try to fight the cloth away, but my body only trembles. A sullen automaton looks into my eyes. A discarded lover? I'm afraid she is going to kiss me. She suffers from vitamin deficiencies. She should eat more fruit and veg, her breath stinks. But at least she controls her motor functions. At least she can use a lavatory. Sleep, sleep, sleep, come free me.

Speak, Memory. No, not a word. My neck moves. Hallelujah. Timothy Langland Cavendish can command his neck and his name has come home. November 7. I recall a yesterday and see a tomorrow. Time, no arrow, no boomerang, but a concertina. Bedsores. How many days have I lain here? Pass. How old is Tim Cavendish? Fifty? Seventy? A hundred? How can you forget your age?

"Mr. Cavendish?" A face rises to the muddy surface.

"Ursula?"

The woman peers in. "Was Ursula your lady wife, Mr. Cavendish?" Don't trust her. "No, I'm Mrs. Judd. You've had a stroke, Mr. Cavendish. Do you understand? A teeny-weeny stroke."

When did it happen? I tried to say. "Airn-dit-hpn" came out.

She crooned. "That's why everything's so topsy-turvy. But don't worry, Dr. Upward says we're making super progress. No horrid hospital for us!" A stroke? Two-stroker? Stroke me? Margo Roker had a stroke. Margo Roker?

Who *are* all you people? *Memory, you old sod.*

I offer that trio of vignettes for the benefit of lucky readers whose psyches have never been razed to rubble by capillaries rupturing in their brains. Putting Timothy Cavendish together again was a Tolstoyan editing job, even for the man who once condensed the nine-volume *Story of Oral Hygiene on the Isle of Wight* to a mere seven hundred pages. Memories refused to fit, or fitted but came unglued. Even months later, how would I know if some major tranche of myself remained lost?

My stroke was relatively light, true, but the month that followed was the most mortifying of my life. I spoke like a spastic. My arms were dead. I couldn't wipe my own arse. My mind shambled in fog yet was aware of my witlessness, and ashamed. I couldn't bring myself to ask the doctor or Sister Noakes or Mrs. Judd, "Who are you?" "Have we met before?" "Where do I go when I leave here?" I kept asking for Mrs. Latham.

Basta! A Cavendish is down but never out. When *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish* is turned into a film, I advise thee, Director dearest, whom I picture as an intense, turtlenecked Swede named Lars, to render that November as a boxer-in-training-for-the-big-fight montage. True Grit Cavendish takes his injections without a quiver. Curious Cavendish rediscovers language. Feral Cavendish redomesticated by Dr. Upward and Nurse Noakes. John Wayne Cavendish on a walker (I graduated to a stick, which I still use. Veronica said it lends me a Lloyd George air). Cavendish à la Carl Sagan, caged in a Dandelion Clock. As long as Cavendish was anesthetized by amnesia, you could say he was content enough.

Then, Lars, strike a chord sinister.

The *Six O'Clock News* on the first day of December (Advent calendars were on show) had just begun. I had fed myself mashed banana with evaporated milk without tipping it down my bib. Nurse Noakes passed by, and my fellow inmates fell silent, like songbirds under the shadow of

a hawk.

All at once, my memory's chastity belt was unlocked and removed.

I rather wished it hadn't been. My "friends" at Aurora House were senile boors who cheated at Scrabble with stunning ineptitude and who were nice to me solely because in the Kingdom of the Dying the most Enfeebled is the common Maginot Line against the Unconquerable Führer. I had been imprisoned a whole month by my vengeful brother, so plainly no nationwide manhunt was under way. I would have to effect my own escape, but how to outrun that mutant groundsman, Withers, when a fifty-yard dash took a quarter of an hour? How to outwit the Noakes from the Black Lagoon when I couldn't even remember my post code?

Oh, the horror, the horror. My mashed banana clagged my throat.

My senses rethroned, I observed the Decembral rituals of man, nature, and beast. The pond iced over in the first week of December, and disgusted ducks skated. Aurora House froze in the mornings and boiled in the evenings. The asexual care worker, whose name was Deirdre, unsurprisingly, strung tinsel from the light fittings and failed to electrocute herself. A plastic tree appeared in a bucket wrapped in crepe paper. Gwendolin Bendincks organized paper-chain drives to which the Undead flocked, both parties oblivious to the irony of the image. The Undead clamored to be the Advent calendar's window opener, a privilege bestowed by Bendincks like the Queen awarding Maundy money: "Mrs. Birkin has found a cheeky snowman, everyone, isn't that fabulous?" Being Nurse Noakes's sheepdog was her and Warlock-Williams's survival niche. I thought of Primo Levi's *Drowned and the Saved*.

Dr. Upward was one of those Academy Award–winning Asses of Arrogance you find in educational administration, law, or medicine. He visited Aurora House twice a week, and if, at age fifty-five or so, his career was not living up to the destiny his name foretold, it was down to us damnable obstacles in the way of all Emissars of Healing, *sick people*. I dismissed him as a possible ally the moment I clapped eyes on him. Nor were the part-time botty wipers, bath scrubbers, and gunk cookers about to jeopardize their lofty positions in society by springing one of their charges.

No, I was stuck in Aurora House all right. A clock with no hands. "Freedom!" is the fatuous jingle of our civilization, but only those deprived of it have the barest inkling re: what the stuff actually is.

A few days before our Savior's Birthday, a minibusload of private-school brats came to sing carols. The Undead sang along with wrong verses and death rattles, and the racket drove me out, it wasn't even funny. I limped around Aurora House in search of my lost vigor, needing the lavvy every thirty minutes. (The Organs of Venus are well known to all but, Brothers, the Organ of Saturn is the Bladder.) Hooded doubts dogged my heels. Why was Den-holme paying my captors his last precious kopecks to infantilize me? Had Georgette, incontinent with senility told my brother about our brief diversion from the highway of fidelity so many years ago? Was this trap a cuckold's revenge?

Mother used to say escape is never further than the nearest book. Well, Mumsy no, not really Your beloved large-print sagas of rags, riches, and heartbreak were no camouflage against the miseries trained on you by the tennis ball launcher of life, were they? But, yes, Mum, there again, you have a point. Books don't offer real escape, but they can stop a mind scratching

itself raw. God knows, I had bog all else to do at Aurora House except read. The day after my miracle recovery I picked up *Half-Lives* and, ye gods, began wondering if Hilary V Hush might not have written a publishable thriller after all. I had a vision of *The First Luisa Rey Mystery* in stylish black-and-bronze selling at Tesco checkouts; then a *Second Mystery,* then the *Third*. Queen Gwen(dolin Bendincks) exchanged a sharp 2B pencil for a blunt blandishment (missionaries are so malleable if you kid them you're a possible convert), and I set about giving the thing a top-to-bottom edit. One or two things will have to go: the insinuation that Luisa Rey is this Robert Frobisher chap reincarnated, for example. Far too hippie-druggy–new age. (I, too, have a birthmark, below my left armpit, but no lover ever compared it to a comet. Georgette nicknamed it Timbo's Turd.) But, overall, I concluded the young-hack-versus-corporate-corruption thriller had potential. (The Ghost of Sir Felix Finch whines, "But it's been done a hundred times before!"—as if there could be anything *not* done a hundred *thousand* times between Aristophanes and Andrew Void-Webber! As if Art is the *What,* not the *How!)* My editing work on *Half-Lives* hit a natural obstacle when Luisa Rey was driven off a bridge and the ruddy manuscript ran out of pages. I tore my hair and beat my breast. Did part two even exist? Was it stuffed in a shoe box in Hilary V's Manhattan apartment? Still abed in her creative uterus? For the twentieth time I searched the secret recesses of my briefcase for the covering letter, but I had left it in my Haymarket office suite.
Other literary pickings were lean. Warlock-Williams told me Aurora House had once boasted a little library, now mothballed. ("The Jellyvision's so much more *Real* for ordinary people, that's what it boils down to.") I needed a miner's helmet and a ruddy pick to locate this "library." It was down a dead end blocked off by stacked-up Great War memorial plaques headed "Lest We Forget." The dust was deep and crisp and even. One shelf of back editions of a magazine called *This England,* a dozen Zane Grey westerns (in large print), a cookbook entitled *No Meat for Me Please!* That left *All Quiet on the Western Front* (in whose page corners a creative schoolboy had long ago drawn frames of a cartoon stick man masturbating with his own nose—where are they now?) and *Jaguars of the Skies,* a yarn of everyday helicopter pilots by "America's Foremost Military Suspense Writer" (but, I happen to know, ghostwritten at his "Command Center"—I shall name no names for fear of legal reprisals), and, frankly, bugger all else.

I took the lot. To the starving man, potato peelings are haute cuisine.

Ernie Blacksmith and Veronica Costello, come in, your time is up. Ernie and I had our moments, but were it not for these fellow dissidents, Nurse Noakes would still have me drugged up to my ruddy eyeballs today. One overcast afternoon while the Undead were in rehearsal for the Big Sleep, the staff were in a meeting, and the only sound troubling Aurora House's slumbers was a WWF contest between Fat One Fauntleroy and the Dispatcher, I noticed, unusually, a careless hand had left the front door ajar. I crept out on a reconnaissance mission, armed with a fib about dizziness and fresh air. Cold singed my lips, and I shivered! My convalescence had stripped me of subcutaneous fat; my frame had shrunk from quasi-Falstaffian to John of Gaunt. It was my first venture outside since the day of my stroke, six or seven weeks before. I circumnavigated the inner grounds and found the ruins of an old building, then fought through unkempt shrubberies to the brick perimeter wall to check for holes or breaches. An SAS sapper could have clambered over with a nylon rope but not a stroke victim with a stick. Drifts of brown-paper leaves were eroded and formed by the wind as I passed. I came to the magnificent iron gates, opened and closed by a flash pneumatic stroke electronic gizmo. Ruddy hell, they even had a surveillance camera and a two-way phone thingy! I imagined Nurse Noakes boasting to the children (I nearly wrote "parents") of

prospective residents that they slept safe and secure thanks to these state-of-the-art surveillance arrangements, meaning, of course, "Pay us on time and you won't hear a dickey bird." The view did not bode well. Hull lay to the south, a half-day hike away for a robust stripling down side roads lined with telegraph poles. Only lost holidaymakers would ever stumble across the institute gates. Walking back down the drive, I heard screeching tires and a furious beep from a Jupiter red Range Rover. I stepped aside. The driver was a bullish fellow clad in one of those silvery anoraks beloved of transpolar fund-raisers. The Range Rover screeched to a gravelly stop at the front steps, and the driver swaggered up to Reception like a flying ace from *Jaguars of the Skies*. Coming back to the main entrance, I passed the boiler room. Ernie Blacksmith poked his head out. "A dram of firewater, Mr. Cavendish?"

I didn't need to be asked twice. The boiler room smelt of fertilizer but was warmed by the boiler's coal furnace. Perched on a sack of coal and making contented baby noises was a longtime resident with the status of institution mascot, Mr. Meeks. Ernie Blacksmith was the kind of quiet man you notice at second glance. This observant Scot kept company with a lady named Veronica Costello, who had owned the finest hat shop, legend had it, in Edinburgh's history The couple's demeanor suggested residents at a shabby Chekhovian hotel. Ernie and Veronica respected my wish to be a miserable bugger, and I respected that. He now produced a bottle of Irish malt from a coal scuttle. "You're half-rocked if you're thinking of getting out of here without a helicopter."

No reason to give anything away "Me?"

My bluff was dashed to pieces on the Rock of Ernie. "Take a pew," he told me, grim and knowing.

I did so. "Cozy in here."

"I was a certificated boiler man once upon a time. I service the workings for free, so the management turn a blind eye to one or two little liberties I allow myself." Ernie poured two generous measures into plastic beakers. "Down the hatch."

Rain on the Serengeti! Cacti flowered, cheetahs loped! "Where do you get it?"

"The coal merchant is not an unreasonable man. Seriously, you want to be careful. Withers goes out to the gate for the second post at a quarter to four daily. You don't want him to catch you plotting your getaway"

"You sound well informed."

"I was a locksmith too, that was after the army You come into contact with the semicrim, in the security game. Gamekeepers and poachers and all. Not that I ever did anything illegal myself, mind you, I was straight as an arrow. But I learnt that a good three-quarters of prison bust outs fall flat, because all the gray matter"— he tapped his temple—"gets spent on the escape itself. Amateurs talk strategy, professionals talk logistics. That fancy electric lock on the gate, for example, I could take it apart blindfolded if I had the mind to, but what about a vehicle on the other side? Money? Bolt-holes? You see, without logistics, where are you? Belly-up is where, and in the back of Withers's van five minutes later."

Mr. Meeks screwed up his gnomish features and ground out the only two coherent words he had retained: "I *know!* I *know!*"

Before I could discern whether or not Ernie Blacksmith was warning me or sounding me out, Veronica came in through the interior door wearing a hat of ice-melting scarlet. I just stopped myself from bowing. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Costello."

"Mr. Cavendish, how pleasant. Wandering abroad in this biting cold?"

"Scouting," Ernie answered, "for his one-man escape committee."

"Oh, once you've been initiated into the Elderly, the world doesn't want you back." Veronica settled herself in a rattan chair and adjusted her hat just so. "We—by whom I mean anyone over sixty—commit two offenses just by existing. One is Lack of Velocity We drive too

slowly walk too slowly talk too slowly The world will do business with dictators, perverts, and drug barons of all stripes, but being slowed down it cannot *abide*. Our second offence is being Everyman's memento mori. The world can only get comfy in shiny-eyed denial if we are out of sight."

"Veronica's parents served life sentences in the intelligentsia," put in Ernie, with a dash of pride.

She smiled fondly. "Just look at the people who come here during visiting hours! They need treatment for shock. Why else do they spout that 'You're only as old as you feel!' claptrap? Really, who are they hoping to fool? Not us—themselves!"

Ernie concluded, "Us elderly are the modern lepers. That's the truth of it."

I objected: "I'm no outcast! I have my own publishing house, and I need to get back to work, and I don't expect you to believe me, but I *am* being confined here against my will."

Ernie and Veronica exchanged a glance in their secret language.

"You *are* a publisher? Or you *were,* Mr. Cavendish?"

"Am. My office is in Haymarket."

"Then what," queried Ernie reasonably, *"are* you doing here?"

Now, that was the question. I recounted my unlikely yarn to date. Ernie and Veronica listened the way sane, attentive adults do. Mr. Meeks nodded off. I got as far as my stroke, when a yelling outside interrupted me. I assumed one of the Undead was having a fit, but a look through the crack showed the driver of the Jupiter red Range Rover shouting into his mobile phone. "Why bother?" Frustration twisted his face. "She's in the clouds! She thinks it's 1966! … No, she's *not* faking it. Would you wet *your* knickers for kicks? … No, she didn't. She thought I was her first husband. She said she didn't *have* any sons … You're telling me it's Oedipal…. Yes, I described it again. Three times…. In detail, *yes*. Come and have a go yourself if you think you can do better…. Well, she never cared for me either. But bring perfume…. No, for *you*. She reeks…. What else would she reek of? … Of *course* they do, but it's hard to keep up, it just … trickles out all the time." He mounted his Range Rover and roared off down the drive. Sprinting after it and nipping through the gates before they swung shut did cross my mind, then I reminded myself of my age. Anyway, the surveillance camera would spot me, and Withers would pick me up before I could flag anyone down.

"Mrs. Hotchkiss's son," Veronica said. "She was a sweet soul, but her son, ooh, no. You don't own half the hamburger franchises in Leeds and Sheffield by being nice. Not a family short of a bob or two."

A mini-Denholme. "Well, at least he visits her."

"And here's why." An attractive, wicked gleam illuminated the old lady. "When Mrs. Hotchkiss got wind of his plan to pack her off to Aurora House, she crammed every last family gem into a shoe box and buried it. Now she can't remember where, or she can remember but isn't saying."

Ernie divided up the last drops of malt. "What gets my goat about him is how he leaves his keys in the ignition. Every time. He'd never do that out in the real world. But we're so decrepit, so harmless, that he doesn't even have to be careful when he visits."

I judged it poor form to ask Ernie why he had noticed a thing like that. He had never spoken an unnecessary word in his life.

I visited the boiler room on a daily basis. The whiskey supply was erratic, but not so the company. Mr. Meeks's role was that of a black Labrador in a long-lived marriage, after the kids have left home. Ernie could spin wry observations about his life and times and Aurora House folklore, but his de facto spouse could converse on most topics under the sun. Veronica

maintained a vast collection of not-quite-stars' autographed photographs. She was widely read enough to appreciate my literary wit but not so widely read that she knew my sources. I like that in a woman. I could say things to her like "The most singular difference between happiness and joy is that happiness is a solid and joy a liquid" and, safe in her ignorance of J. D. Salinger, I felt witty, charming, and yes, even youthful. I felt Ernie watching me as I showed off, but what the heck? I thought. A man may flirt.

Veronica and Ernie were survivors. They warned me about the dangers of Aurora House: how its pong of urine and disinfectant, the Undead Shuffle, Noakes's spite, the catering redefine the concept of "ordinary" Once any tyranny becomes accepted as ordinary, according to Veronica, its victory is assured.

Thanks to her, I ruddy well bucked my ideas up. I clipped my nasal hair and borrowed some shoe polish from Ernie. "Shine your shoes every night," my old man used to say, "and you're as good as anyone." Looking back, I see that Ernie tolerated my posturing because he knew Veronica was only humoring me. Ernie had never read a work of fiction in his life—"Always a radio man, me"—but watching him coax the Victorian boiler system into life one more time, I always felt shallow. It's true, reading too many novels makes you go blind.

I cooked up my first escape plan—one so simple it hardly warrants the name—alone. It needed will and a modicum of courage, but not brains. A nocturnal telephone call from the phone in Nurse Noakes's office to the answering machine of Cavendish Publishing. An SOS for Mrs. Latham, whose rugger-bugger nephew drives a mighty Ford Capri. They arrive at Aurora House; after threats and remonstrances I get in; nevvy drives off. That's all. On the night of December 15 (I think), I woke myself up in the early hours, put on my dressing gown, and let myself into the dim corridor. (My door had been left unlocked since I began playing possum.) No sound but snores and plumbing. I thought of Hilary V Hush's Luisa Rey creeping around Swannekke B. (Behold my bifocals.) Reception looked empty but I crawled below the level of the desk commando style and hoisted myself back to the vertical—no mean feat. Noakes's office light was off. I tried the door handle, and yes, it gave. In I slipped. Just enough light came in through the crack to see. I picked up the receiver and dialed the number of Cavendish Publishing. I did not get through to my answering machine.

"You cannot make the call as dialed. Replace the handset, check the number, and try again."

Desolation. I assumed the worst, that the Hogginses had torched the place so badly that even the telephones had melted. I tried once more, in vain. The only other telephone number I could reconstruct since my stroke was my next, and last, resort. After five or six tense rings Georgette, my sister-in-law, answered in the kittenish pout I knew, Lordy Lordy I knew. "It's gone bedtime, Aston."

"Georgette, it's me, Timbo. Put Denny on, will you?"

"Aston? What's wrong with you?"

"It isn't Aston, Georgette! It's Timbo!"

"Put Aston back on, then!"

"I don't know Aston! Listen, you *must* get me Denny."

"Denny can't come to the phone right now."

Georgette's grip on her rocker was never exactly firm, but she sounded buckarooed over the rainbow. "Are you drunk?"

"Only if it's a nice wine bar with a good cellar. I can't abide pubs."

"No, listen, it's Timbo, your brother-in-law! I've got to speak to Denholme."

"You sound like Timbo. Timbo? Is that you?"

"Yes, Georgette, it's me, and if this is a—"

“Rather rum of you not to turn up at your own brother’s funeral. That’s what the whole family thought.”
The floor spun. *“What?”*
“We knew about your various tiffs, *but* I *mean—*”
I fell. “Georgette, you just said Denny is dead. Did you mean to say it?”
“Of course I did! D’you think I’m bloody doolally?”
“Tell me once more.” I lost my voice. “Is—Denny—dead?”
“D’you think I’d make something like this up?”
Nurse Noakes’s chair creaked with treachery and torture. “How, Georgette, for Christ’s sake, how?”
“Who are you? It’s the middle of the night! Who is this, anyway? Aston, is this you?”
I had a cramp in my throat. “Timbo.”
“Well, what clammy stone have *you* been hiding under?”
“Look, Georgette. How did Denny”—saying made it more so— “pass away?”
“Feeding his priceless carp. I was spreading duckling pâté on crackers for supper. When I went to fetch Denny he was floating in the pond, facedown. He may have been there a day or so, I wasn’t his babysitter, you know. Dixie had told him to cut back on the salt, strokes run in his family. Look, stop hogging this line and put Aston on.”
“Listen, who’s there now? With you?”
“Just Denny”
“But Denny’s dead!”
“I know that! He’s been in the fishpond for absolutely … weeks, now. How am I supposed to get him out? Listen, Timbo, be a dear, bring me a hamper or something from Fortnum and Mason’s, will you? I ate all the crackers, and all the thrushes ate the crumbs, so now I’ve got nothing to eat but fish food and Cumberland sauce. Aston hasn’t called back since he borrowed Denny’s art collection to show his evaluator friend, and that was … days ago, weeks rather. The gas people have stopped the supply and …”
My eyes stung with light.
The doorway filled with Withers. “You again.”
I flipped. “My brother has died! Dead, do you understand? Stone Ruddy Dead! My sister-in-law’s *bonkers,* and she doesn’t know what to do! This is a family emergency! If you have a Christian bone in your ruddy body you’ll help me sort this out this godawful ruddy mess!”
Dear Reader, Withers saw only a hysterical inmate making nuisance calls after midnight. He shoved a chair from his path with his foot. I cried into the phone: “Georgette, listen to me, I’m trapped in a ruddy madhouse hellhole called *Aurora House* in *Hull,* you’ve got that? *Aurora House* in *Hull,* and for Christ’s sake, get anybody there to come up and rescue—”

A giant finger cut my line. Its nail was gammy and bruised.

Nurse Noakes walloped the breakfast gong to declare hostilities open. “Friends, we have clasped a *thief to* our bosom.” A hush fell over the assembled Undead.
A desiccated walnut banged his spoon. “The Ay-rabs know what to do with ’em, Nurse! No light-fingered Freddies in Saudi, eh? Friday afternoons in the mosque car parks, *chop!* Eh? Eh?”
“A rotten apple is in our barrel.” I swear, it was Gresham Boys’ School again, sixty years on. The same shredded wheat disintegrating in the same bowl of milk. “Cavendish!” Nurse Noakes’s voice vibrated like a pennywhistle. “Stand!” The heads of those semiani-mate autopsies in mildewed tweeds and colorless blouses swiveled my way. If I responded like a victim, I would seal my own sentence.

It was hard to care. I had not slept a wink all night. Denny was dead. Turned to carps, most likely. “Oh, for God’s sake, woman, get some proportion in your life. The Crown Jewels are still safe in the Tower! All I did was make one crucial telephone call. If Aurora House *had* a cybercafe I would willingly have sent an e-mail! I didn’t want to wake anyone up, so I used my initiative and borrowed the telephone. My profoundest apologies. I’ll pay for the call.”

“Oh, pay you shall. Residents, what do we do to Rotten Apples?”

Gwendolin Bendincks rose and pointed her finger. “Shame on you!”

Warlock-Williams seconded the motion. “Shame on you!”

One by one those Undead sentient enough to follow the plot joined in. “Shame on you! Shame on you! Shame on you!” Mr. Meeks conducted the chorus like Herbert von Karajan. I poured my tea, but a wooden ruler knocked the cup from my hands.

Nurse Noakes spat electrical sparks: “Don’t *dare* look away while you’re being shamed!”

The chorus died the death, except for one or two stragglers.

My knuckles whimpered. Anger and pain focused my wits like a zazen beating stick. “I doubt the kindly Mr. Withers told you, but it transpires my brother Denholme is dead. Yes, stone dead. Call him yourself, if you won’t believe me. Indeed, I beg you to call him. My sister-in-law is not a well woman, and she needs help with funeral arrangements.”

“How could you know your brother had died before you broke into my office?”

A crafty double nelson. Her crucifix toying inspired me. “Saint Peter.”

Big Bad Frown. “What about him?”

“In a dream he told me that Denholme recently passed to the Other Side. ‘Phone your sister-in-law,’ he said. ‘She needs your help.’ I told him using the telephone was against Aurora House rules, but Saint Peter assured me that Nurse Noakes was a Godfearing Catholic who wouldn’t mock such an explanation.”

La Duca was actually halted in her tracks by this balderdash. (“Know thine Enemy” trumps “Know thyself”) Noakes ran through the alternatives: was I a dangerous deviant; harmless delusional; re-alpolitikster; Petrine visionary? “Our rules in Aurora House are for everyone’s benefit.”

Time to consolidate my gains. “How true that is.”

“I shall have a chat with the Lord. In the meantime”—she addressed the dining room—“Mr. Cavendish is on probation. This episode is not gone and not forgotten.”

After my modest victory I played patience (the card game, not the virtue, never that) in the lounge, something I had not done since my ill-starred Tintagel honeymoon with Madame X. (The place was a dive. All crumbling council houses and joss-stick shops.) Patience’s design flaw became obvious for the first time in my life: the outcome is decided not during the course of play but when the cards are shuffled, before the game even begins. How pointless is that? The point is that it lets your mind go elsewhere. Elsewhere was not rosy. Denholme had died some time ago, but I was still in Aurora House. I dealt myself a new worst-case scenario, one where Denholme sets up a standing order from one of his tricky-dicky accounts to pay for my residency in Aurora House, out of kindness or malice. Denholme dies. My flight from the Hogginses was classified, so nobody knows I’m here. The standing order survives its maker. Mrs. Latham tells the police I was last seen going to a loan shark. Detective Plod conjectures I had been turned down by my lender of the last resort and had Done a Eurostar. So, six weeks later, nobody is looking for me, not even the Hogginses.

Ernie and Veronica came up to my table. “I used that telephone to check the cricket scores.” Ernie was in ill humor. “Now it’ll be locked up at nights.”

“Black ten on red jack,” advised Veronica. “Never mind, Ernie.”

Ernie ignored her. "Noakes'll be looking to lynch you now."
"What can she do? Take away my shredded wheat?"
"She'll Mickey Finn your food! Like the last time."
"What on earth are you talking about?"
"Remember the last time you crossed her?"
"When?"
"The morning of your conveniently timed stroke was when."
"Are you saying my stroke was … induced?"
Ernie made an extremely irritating "wakey, wakey!" face.
"Oh, pish and tosh! My father died of a stroke, my brother probably died of one. Print your own reality if you must, Ernest, but leave Veronica and me out of it."
Ernie glowered. (Lars, lower the lighting.) "Aye. You think you're so damn clever, but you're nothing but a hoity-toity southern wazzock!"
"Better a wazzock, whatever one of those is, than a quitter." I knew I was going to regret that.
"A quitter? Me? Call me that just once more. Go on."
"Quitter." (Oh, Imp of the Perverse! Why do I let you speak for me?) "What I think is this. You've given up on the real world outside this prison because it intimidates you. Seeing someone else escape would make you uncomfortable with your taste in deathbeds. That's why you're throwing this tantrum now."
The Gas Ring of Ernie flared. "Where I stop isn't for you to pass judgments on, Timothy Cavendish!" (A Scot can turn a perfectly decent name into a head-butt.) "*Y ou* couldn't escape from a garden center!"
"If you've got a foolproof plan, let's hear it."
Veronica attempted to mediate. "Boys!"
Ernie's blood was up. "*Foolproof*depends on the size of the fool."
"Witty homily, that." My sarcasm disgusted me. "You must be a genius in Scotland."
"No, in Scotland a genius is an Englishman who gets himself *accidentally* imprisoned in a retirement home."
Veronica gathered my scattered cards. "Do either of you know clock patience? You have to add cards up to fifteen?"
"We're leaving, Veronica," growled Ernie.
"No," I snapped and stood up, wanting to avoid Veronica having to choose between us, for my sake. "*I*'m leaving."
I vowed not to visit the boiler room until I received an apology. So I didn't go that afternoon,

or the next, or the next.

Ernie refused to meet my eye all Christmas week. Veronica gave me sorry smiles in passing, but her loyalties were clear. In hindsight, I am stupefied. What was I thinking? Jeopardizing my only friendships with sulks! I've always been a gifted sulker, which explains a lot. Sulkers binge on lonely fantasies. Fantasies about the Hotel Chelsea on West Twenty-third Street, about knocking on a certain door. It opens, and Miss Hilary V Hush is *very* pleased to see me, her nightshirt hangs loose, she is as innocent as Kylie Minogue but as she-wolfish as Mrs. Robinson. "I've flown round the world to find you," I say. She pours a whiskey from the minibar. "Mature. Mellow. Malty." That naughty she-husky then draws me to her unmade bed, where I search for the fount of eternal youth.
Half-Lives, Part II sits on a shelf above the bed. I read the manuscript, suspended in the postorgasmic Dead Sea, while Hilary takes a shower. The second half is even better than the first, but the Master will teach his Acolyte how to make it superb. Hilary dedicates the novel to

me, wins the Pulitzer, and confesses at her acceptance speech that she owes everything to her agent, friend, and in many ways, father.

Sweet fantasy Cancer for the cure.

Christmas Eve at Aurora House was a lukewarm dish. I strolled out (a privilege bartered through the offices of Gwendolin Bendincks) to the gates for a glimpse of the outside world. I gripped the iron gate and looked through the bars. (Visual irony, Lars. *Casablanca*.) My vision roamed the moor, rested on a burial mound, an abandoned sheep pen, hovered on a Norman church yielding to Druidic elements at last, skipped to a power station, skimmed the ink-stained Sea of the Danes to the Humber bridge, tracked a warplane over corrugated fields. Poor England. Too much history for its acreage. Years grow inwards here, like my toenails. The surveillance camera watched me. It had all the time in the world. I considered ending my sulk with Ernie Blacksmith, if only to hear a civil Merry Christmas from Veronica. No. To hell with 'em both.

"Reverend Rooney!" He had a sherry in one hand, and I tied up the other with a mince pie. Behind the Christmas tree, fairy lights pinkened our complexions. "I have a teeny-weeny favor to beg."

"What might that be, Mr. Cavendish?" No comedy vicar, he. Reverend Rooney was a Career Cleric, the spitting image of a tax-evading Welsh picture framer I once crossed swords with in Hereford, but that is another story.

"I'd like you to pop a Christmas card in the post for me, Reverend."

"Is that all? Surely if you asked Nurse Noakes she'd see to it for you?"

So the hag had got to him, too.

"Nurse Noakes and I don't always see eye to eye regarding communications with the outside world."

"Christmas is a wonderful time for bridging the spaces between us."

"Christmas is a wonderful time for letting snoozing dogs snooze, Vicar. But I do so want my sister to know I'm thinking of her over our Lord's Birthday Nurse Noakes may have mentioned the death of my dear brother?"

"Terribly sad." He knew about the Saint Peter affair all right. "I'm sorry."

I produced the card from my jacket pocket. "I've addressed it to 'The Caregiver,' just to make sure my Yuletide greetings do get through. She's not all"—I tapped my head—"*there,* I'm sorry to say. Here, let me slip it into your cassock pouch …" He squirmed, but I had him cornered. "I'm so blessed, Vicar, to have friends I can trust. Thank you, *thank you,* from the bottom of my heart."

Simple, effective, subtle, you sly old fox TC. By New Year's Day, Aurora House would wake to find me gone, like Zorro.

Ursula invites me into the wardrobe. "You haven't aged a day, Timbo, and neither has *this* snaky fellow!" Her furry fawn rubs up against my Narnian-sized lamppost and mothballs … but then, as ever, I awoke, my swollen appendage as welcome as a swollen appendix, and as useful. Six o'clock. The heating systems composed works in the style of John Cage. Chilblains burned my toe knuckles. I thought about Christmases gone, so many more gone than lay ahead. How many more mornings did I have to endure?

"Courage, TC. A spanking red post-office train is taking your letter south to Mother London. Its cluster bombs will be released on impact, to the police, to the social welfare people, to Mrs.

Latham c/o the old Haymarket address. You'll be out of here in a jiffy." My imagination described those belated Christmas presents I would celebrate my freedom with. Cigars, vintage whiskey a dalliance with Little Miss Muffet on her ninety pence per minute line. Why stop there? A return match to Thailand with Guy the Guy and Captain Viagra?

I noticed a misshapen woolen sock hanging from the mantelpiece. It hadn't been there when I had turned out the light. Who could have crept in without waking me? Ernie calling a Christmas truce? Who else? Good old Ernie! Shuddering happily in my flannel pajamas, I retrieved the stocking and brought it back to bed. It was very light. I turned it inside out, and a blizzard of torn paper came out. My handwriting, my words, my phrases!

My letter!

My salvation, ripped up. I beat my breast, gnashed my hair, tore my teeth, I injured my wrist by pounding my mattress. Reverend Ruddy Rooney Rot in Hell! Nurse Noakes, that bigoted bitch! She had stood over me like the Angel of Death, as I slept! Merry Ruddy Christmas, Mr. Cavendish!

I succumbed. Late-fifteenth-century verb, Old French *succomber* or Latin *succumbere,* but a basic necessity of the human condition, especially mine. I succumbed to the bovine care assistants. I succumbed to the gift tag: "To Mr. Cavendish from your new pals— many more Aurora House Christingles to come!" I succumbed to my gift: the Wonders of Nature two-months-to-a-page calendar. (Date of death not included.) I succumbed to the rubber turkey, the synthetic stuffing, the bitter Brussels sprouts; to the bangless cracker (mustn't induce heart attacks, bad for business), its midget's paper crown, its snonky bazoo, its clean joke (Barman: "What'll it be?" Skeleton: "Pint and a mop, please."). I succumbed to the soap-opera specials, spiced with extra Christmas violence; to Queenie's speech from the grave. Coming back from a pee, I met Nurse Noakes, and succumbed to her triumphal "Season's greetings, Mr. Cavendish!"

A history program on BBC2 that afternoon showed old footage shot in Ypres in 1919. That hellish mockery of a once fair town was my own soul.

Three or four times only in my youth did I glimpse the Joyous Isles, before they were lost to fogs, depressions, cold fronts, ill winds, and contrary tides … I mistook them for adulthood. Assuming they were a fixed feature in my life's voyage, I neglected to record their latitude, their longitude, their approach. Young ruddy fool. What wouldn't I give now for a never-changing map of the ever-constant ineffable? To possess, as it were, an atlas of clouds.

I made it to Boxing Day because I was too miserable to hang myself. I lie. I made it to Boxing Day because I was too cowardly to hang myself. Lunch was a turkey broth (with crunchy lentils), enlivened only by a search for Deirdre's (the androgynous automaton) misplaced mobile phone. The zombies enjoyed thinking where it could be (down sides of sofas), places it probably wasn't (the Christmas tree), and places it couldn't possibly be (Mrs. Birkin's bedpan). I found myself tapping at the boiler room door, like a repentant puppy

Ernie stood over a washing machine in pieces on newspapers. "Look who it isn't."

"Merry Boxing Day, Mr. Cavendish"—Veronica beamed, in a Romanov fur hat. She had a fat book of poetry propped on her lap. "Come in, do."

"Been a day or two," I understated, awkwardly.

"I *know!"* exclaimed Mr. Meeks. "I *know!"*

Ernie still radiated disdain.

"Er … can I come in, Ernie?"

He hoisted then dropped his chin a few degrees to show it was all the same to him. He was

taking apart the boiler again, tiny silver screws in his chunky, oily digits. He wasn't making it easy for me. "Ernie," I finally said, "sorry about the other day."
"Aye."
"If you don't get me out of here … I'll lose my mind."
He disassembled a component I couldn't even name. "Aye."
Mr. Meeks rocked himself to and fro.
"So … what do you say?"
He lowered himself onto a bag of fertilizer. "Oh, don't be soft."
I don't believe I had smiled since the Frankfurt Book Fair. My face hurt.
Veronica corrected her flirty-flirty hat. "Tell him about our fee, Ernest."
"Anything, anything." I never meant it more. "What's your price?"
Ernie made me wait until every last screwdriver was back in his tool bag. "Veronica and I have decided to venture forth to pastures new." He nodded in the direction of the gate. "Up north. I've got an old friend who'll see us right. So, you'll be taking us with you."
I hadn't seen that coming, but who cared? "Fine, fine. Delighted."
"Settled, then. D-Day is two days from now."
"So soon? You've already got a plan?"
The Scot sniffed, unscrewed his thermos, and poured pungent black tea into its cap. "You could say as much, aye."

Ernie's plan was a high-risk sequence of toppling dominoes. "Any escape strategy," he lectured, "must be more ingenious than your guards." It *was* ingenious, not to say audacious, but if any domino failed to trigger the next, instant exposure would bring dire results, especially if Ernie's macabre theory of enforced medication was in fact true. Looking back, I am amazed at myself for agreeing to go along with it. My gratitude that my friends were talking to me again, and my desperation to get out of Aurora House—alive— muted my natural prudence, I can only suppose.
December 28 was chosen because Ernie had learnt from Deirdre that Mrs. Judd was staying in Hull for nieces and pantomimes. "Intelligence groundwork." Ernie tapped his nose. I would have preferred Withers or the Noakes harpy to be off the scene, but Withers only left to visit his mother in Robin Hood's Bay in August, and Ernie considered Mrs. Judd was the most levelheaded of our jailers and thus the most dangerous.

D-Day I reported to Ernie's room thirty minutes after the Undead were put to bed at ten o'clock. "Last chance to back out if you don't think you can hack it," the artful Scot told me.
"I've never backed out of anything in my life," I replied, lying through my decaying teeth.
Ernie unscrewed the ventilation unit and removed Deirdre's mobile telephone from its hiding place. "You've got the poshest voice," he had informed me, when allocating our various roles, "and bullshitting on telephones is how you make your living." I entered Johns Hotchkiss's number, obtained by Ernie from Mrs. Hotchkiss's phone book months earlier.
It was answered with a sleepy "Whatizzit?"
"Ah, yes, Mr. Hotchkiss?"
"Speaking. You are?"
Reader, you would have been proud of me. "Dr. Conway Aurora House. I'm covering for Dr. Upward."
"Jesus, has something happened to Mother?"
"I'm afraid so, Mr. Hotchkiss. You must steel yourself. I don't think she'll make it to the morning."

"Oh! Oh?"
A woman in the background demanded, "Who is it, Johns?"
"Jesus! Really?"
"Really."
"But what's … wrong with her?"
"Severe pleurisy."
"Pleurisy?"
Perhaps my empathy with the role outpaced my expertise, by a whisker. "Healey's pleurisy is *never* impossible in women your mother's age, Mr. Hotchkiss. Look, I'll go over my diagnosis once you're here. Your mother is asking for you. I've got her on twenty mgs of, uh, morphadin-50, so she isn't in any pain. Odd thing is, she keeps talking about jewelry. Over and over, she's saying, 'I must tell Johns, I must tell Johns …' Does that make any sense to you?"
The moment of truth.
He bit! "My God. Are you positive? Can she remember where she put it?"
The background woman said, *"What? What?"*
"She seems terribly distressed that these jewels stay in the family."
"Of course, of course, but where are they, Doctor? Where is she saying she stashed them?"
"Look, I have to get back to her room, Mr. Hotchkiss. I'll meet you in Reception at Aurora House…. When?"
"Ask her where—no, tell her—tell Mummy to— Look, Doctor— er—"
"Er … Conway! Conway"
"Dr. Conway, can you hold your phone against my mother's mouth?"
"I'm a doctor, not a telephone club. Come yourself. Then she can tell you."
"Tell her—just hang on till we get there, for God's sake. Tell her—Pipkins loves her very much. I'll be over … half an hour."
The end of the beginning. Ernie zipped his bag. "Nice work. Keep the phone, in case he calls back."

Domino two had me standing sentinel in Mr. Meeks's room watching through the crack in the door. Due to his advanced state of decay, our loyal boiler room mascot wasn't in on the great escape, but his room was opposite mine, and he understood "Shush!" At a quarter past ten Ernie went to Reception to announce my death to Nurse Noakes. This domino could fall in unwelcome directions. (Our discussions over whom the corpse and whither the messenger had been lengthy: Veronica's death would require a drama beyond Ernie's powers not to arouse our shrew's suspicion; Ernie's death, reported by Veronica, was ruled out by her tendency to lapse into melodrama; both Ernie's and Veronica's rooms were bordered by sentient Un-dead who might throw a spanner in our works. My room, however, was in the old school wing, and my only neighbor was Mr. Meeks.) The big unknown lay in Nurse Noakes's personal loathing for me. Would she rush to see her enemy fallen, to stick a hatpin in my neck to check I was truly dead? Or celebrate in style first?

Footsteps. A knock on my door. Nurse Noakes, sniffing the bait. Domino three was teetering, but already deviations were creeping in. Ernie was supposed to have accompanied her as far as the door of my death chamber. She must have rushed on ahead. From my hiding place I saw the predator peering in. She switched on the lights. The classic plot staple of pillows under the blankets, more realistic than you'd think, lured her in. I dashed across the corridor and yanked the door shut. From this point on, the third domino depended on lock mechanisms—the

external latch was a stiff, rotary affair, and before I had it turned Noakes was hauling the door open again—her foot levered against the doorframe—her demonic strength uprooting my biceps and tearing my wrists. Victory, I knew, would not be mine.
So I took a big risk and abruptly released the handle. The door flew open, and the witch soared across the room. Before she could charge at the door again I had it shut and locked. A *Titus Andronicus* catalog of threats beat at the door. They haunt my nightmares still. Ernie came puffing up with a hammer and some three-inch nails. He nailed the door to its frame and left the huntress snarling in a prison cell of her own invention.

Down in Reception, domino four was bleeping blue murder on the main gate intercom machine. Veronica knew what button to press. "I've been bloody bleeping this bloody thing for ten bloody minutes while Mother is bloody fading away!" Johns Hotchkiss was upset. "What the f*** are you people playing at?"
"I had to help Dr. Conway restrain your mother, Mr. Hotchkiss."
"Restrain her? For *pleurisy?"*
Veronica pressed the open switch, and across the grounds the gate, we hoped, swung wide. (I preempt the letter-writing reader who may demand to know why we hadn't used this very switch to make a run for it by explaining that the gate closed automatically after forty seconds; that the reception desk was ordinarily manned; and that wintry miles of moorland lay beyond.)
Through the freezing mist, the screech of tires grew louder. Ernie hid in the back office, and I greeted the Range Rover on the outside steps. Johns Hotchkiss's wife was in the driving seat.
"How is she?" demanded Hotchkiss, striding over.
"Still with us, Mr. Hotchkiss, still asking for you."
"Thank Christ. You're this Conway?"
I wanted to head off more medical questions. "No, the doctor's with your mother, I just work here."
"I've never seen you."
"My daughter is an assistant nurse here, actually, but because of the staffing shortage and emergency with your mother I'm out of retirement to man the front desk. Hence the delay in getting the main gate open."
His wife slammed the car door. *"Johns!* Hello? It's below freezing out here and your mother is dying. Can we sort out lapses in protocol later?"
Veronica had appeared in a spangly nightcap. "Mr. Hotchkiss? We've met on several occasions. Your mother is my dearest friend here. Do hurry to her, please. She's in her own room. The doctor thought it too dangerous to move her."
Johns Hotchkiss half-smelt a rat, but how could he accuse this dear old biddy of deceit and conspiracy? His wife harried and hauled him down the corridor.

I was in a driving seat again. Ernie hoisted his arthritic *cara* and an unreasonable number of hatboxes into the back, then jumped into the passenger seat. I hadn't replaced the car after Madame X left, and the intervening years did not fall away as I had hoped. Ruddy hell, which pedal was which? Accelerator, brake, clutch, mirror, signal, maneuver. I reached for the key in the ignition. "What are you waiting for?" asked Ernie.
My fingers insisted there was no key.
"Hurry, Tim, hurry!"
"No key No ruddy key."
"He *always* leaves it in the ignition!"
My fingers insisted there was no key. "His wife was driving! She took the keys! The ruddy

female took the keys in with her! Sweet Saint Ruddy Jude, what do we do now?"
Ernie looked on the dashboard, in the glove compartment, on the floor.
"Can't you hot-wire it?" My voice was desperate.
"Don't be soft!" he shouted back, scrabbling through the ashtray.
Domino five was Super-Glued vertical. "Excuse me," said Veronica.
"Look under the sun flap!"
"Nothing here but a ruddy ruddy ruddy—"
"Excuse me," said Veronica. "Is this a car key?"
Ernie and I turned, howled, *"No-oooooo,"* in stereo at the Yale key. We howled again as we saw Withers running down the nightlit corridor from the dining room annex, with two Hotchkisses close behind.
"Oh," said Veronica. "This fat one fell out, too …"
We watched as Withers reached Reception. He looked through the glass straight at me, transmitting a mental image of a Rottweiler savaging a doll sewn in the shape of Timothy Langland Cavendish, aged sixty-five and three-quarters. Ernie locked all the doors, but what good would that do us?
"How about this one?" Was Veronica dangling a car key in front of my nose? With a Range Rover logo on it.
Ernie and I howled, *"Yeeeeee-sss!"*
Withers flung open the front door and leapt down the steps.
My fingers fumbled and dropped the key.
Withers flew head-over-arse on a frozen puddle.
I banged my head on the steering wheel and the horn sounded.
Withers was pulling at the locked door. My fingers scrabbled as indoor fireworks of pain flashed in my skull. Johns Hotchkiss was screaming, "Get your bony carcasses out of my car or I'll sue— *Dammit, I'll sue anyway!"* Withers banged my window with a club, no, it was his fist; the wife's gemstone ring scratched the glass; the key somehow slid home into the ignition; the engine roared into life; the dashboard lit up with fairy lights; Chet Baker was singing "Let's Get Lost;" Withers was hanging on to the door and banging; the Hotchkisses crouched in my headlamps like El Greco sinners; I put the Range Rover into first, but it shunted rather than moved because the hand brake was on; Aurora House lit up like the *Close Encounters* UFO; I flung away the sensation of having lived through this very moment many times before; I released the hand brake, bumped Withers; moved up to second; the Hotchkisses were not drowning but waving and there they went and we had lift-*off*!

I drove round the pond, away from the gates, because Mrs. Hotchkiss had left the Range Rover pointing that way. I checked the mirror—Withers and the Hotchkisses were sprinting after us like ruddy commandos. "I'm going to lure them away from the gates," I blurted to Ernie, "to give you time to pick the lock. How long will you need? I reckon you'll have forty-five seconds."
Ernie hadn't heard me.
"How long will you need to pick the lock?"
"You'll have to ram the gates."
"What?"
"Nice big Range Rover at fifty miles per hour should do the trick."
"What? You said you could pick the lock in your sleep!"
"A state-of-the-art electric thing? No way!"
"I wouldn't have locked up Noakes and stolen a car if I'd known you couldn't pick the lock!"

"Aye, exactly, you're nesh, so you needed encouragement."
"Encouragement?" I yelled, scared, desperate, furious in equal thirds. The car tore through a shrubbery and the shrubbery tore back.
"How terribly *thrilling!"* exclaimed Veronica.
Ernie spoke as if discussing a DIY puzzler. "So long as the center pole isn't sunk deep, the gates'll just fly apart on impact."
"And if it *is* sunk deep?"
Veronica revealed a manic streak. "Then *we*'ll fly apart on impact! So, foot to the floor, Mr. Cavendish!"
The gates flew at us, ten, eight, six car lengths away. Dad spoke from my pelvic floor. "Do you have any *inkling* of the trouble you're in, boy?" So I obeyed my father, yes, I obeyed him and I slammed on the brakes. Mum hissed in my ear: "Sod it, our Timbo, what have you got to lose?" The thought that I had slammed not the brakes but the accelerator was the last—two car lengths, one, *wham!*
The vertical bars became diagonal ones.
The gates flew off their hinges.
My heart bungee-jumped from throat to bowel, back again, back again, and the Range Rover skidded all over the road, I gripped my intestines shut with all my might, the brakes screeched but I kept her out of the ditches, engine still running, windscreen still intact.
Dead stop.
Fog thickened and thinned in the headlight beams.
"We're proud of you," Veronica said, "aren't we, Ernest?"
"Aye, pet, that we are!" Ernie slapped my back. I heard Withers barking doom and ire, close behind. Ernie wound down the window and howled back at Aurora House: "Waaaaaaazzzzzzoooooo-cccccckkk!" I touched the accelerator again. The tires scuffed gravel, the engine flowered, and Aurora House disappeared into the night. Ruddy hell, when your parents die they move in with you.

"Road map?" Ernie was ferreting through the glove compartment. His finds so far included sunglasses and Werner's toffees.
"No need. I memorized our route. I know it like the back of my hand. Any escape is nine-tenths logistics."
"Better steer clear of the motorways. They have cameras and whatnot nowadays."
I contemplated my career change from publisher to car rustler. "I know."
Veronica impersonated Mr. Meeks—brilliantly. *"I know! I know!"*
I told her it was an uncannily accurate impression.
A pause. "I didn't say anything."
Ernie turned round and yelled in surprise. When I looked in the mirror and saw Mr. Meeks twitching in the rearmost compartment of the vehicle, I nearly drove us off the road. "How—" I began. "When—who—"
"Mr. Meeks!" cooed Veronica. "What a nice surprise."
"A surprise?" I said. "He's broken the laws of ruddy physics!"
"We can't very well do a U-ie back to Hull," Ernie stated, "and it's too cold to drop him off. He'd be an ice block by morning."
"We've run away from Aurora House, Mr. Meeks," Veronica explained.
"I know," the sozzled old duffer bleated, "I know."
"All for one and one for all, is it?"
Mr. Meeks leaked a giggle, sucked toffees, and hummed "The British Grenadiers" as the

Range Rover wolfed down the northward miles.

A sign—PLEASE DRIVE CAREFULLY IN SCOTCH CROSS—shone in the headlights. Ernie had ended our route plan here with a big red X, and now I saw why. An all-night petrol station servicing an A-road—next door to a pub called the Hanged Edward. Midnight was long gone, but the lights were still on. "Park in the pub. I'll go and get us a can of petrol so nobody'll spot us. Then my vote's for a swift pint to celebrate a job well done. Silly Johns left his jacket in the car, and in the jacket—tra-la." Ernie flashed a wallet the size of my briefcase. "I'm sure he can stand us a round." *"I know!"* enthused Mr. Meeks. "I know!"
"A Drambuie and soda," Veronica decided, "would hit the spot."
Ernie was back in five minutes carrying the can. "No bother." He siphoned the petrol into the tank, then the four of us walked across the car park to the Hanged Edward. "A crisp night," remarked Ernie, offering his arm to Veronica. It was ruddy freezing, and I couldn't stop shivering. "A beautiful moon, Ernest," added Veronica, looping hers through his. "What a splendid night for an elopement!" She giggled like a sixteen-year-old. I screwed the lid down on my old demon, Jealousy. Mr. Meeks was wobbly, so I supported him as far as the door, where a blackboard advertised "The Massive Match!" In the warm cave inside, a crowd watched TV soccer in a distant fluorescent time zone. In the eighty-first minute England was a goal down to Scotland. Nobody even noticed us. England playing Scotland, abroad, in the deep midwinter—is it World Cup qualifier time again already? Talk about Rip van Ruddy Winkle. I'm no fan of television pubs, but at least there was no thumpy-thumpy-thump acidic music, and that evening freedom was the sweetest commodity A sheepdog made room for us on a fireside pew. Ernie ordered the drinks because he said my accent was too southern and they might spit in my glass. I had a double Kilma-goon and the most expensive cigar the bar could muster, Veronica ordered her Drambuie and soda, Mr. Meeks a ginger beer, and Ernie a pint of Angry Bastard bitter. The barman didn't take his eyes off the TV—he got our drinks by sense of touch alone. Just as we took our seats in an alcove, a cyclone of despair swept through the bar. England had been awarded a penalty Tribalism electrified the audience.
"I'd like to check my route. Ernie, the map if you will."
"You had it last."
"Oh. Must be in …" My room. Extreme close-up, Director Lars, of Cavendish realizing his fateful mistake. I had left the map on my bed. For Nurse Noakes. With our route marked out in felt pen. "… the car … oh, God. I think we had better drink up and move on."
"But we've only just started this round."
I swallowed hard. "About the, er, map …" I checked my watch and calculated distances and speeds.
Ernie was catching on. "What about the map?"
My answer was drowned in a howl of tribal grief. England had equalized. And at that *exact* moment, I fib not, Withers looked in. His Gestapo eyes settled on us. Not a happy man. Johns Hotchkiss appeared beside him, saw us, and he looked very happy indeed. He reached for his mobile phone to summon his angels of vengeance. A third lout with oil-stained overalls completed the posse, but it appeared Nurse Noakes had so far prevailed on Johns Hotchkiss to leave the police out of it. The oily lout's identity I was never to discover, but I knew right then: the game was up.
Veronica sighed a frail sigh. "I had so hoped to see," she half-sang, "the wild mountain thyme, all across the blooming heather, and it's go, lassie, go …"
A drug-addled semilife of restraints and daytime programs lay ahead. Mr. Meeks stood up to go with our jailer.

He let out a biblical bellow. (Lars: zoom the camera in from the outside car park, across the busy bar, and right down between Mr. Meeks's rotted tonsils.) The TV viewers dropped their conversations, spilt their drinks, and looked. Even Withers was stopped in his tracks. The octogenarian leapt onto the bar, like Astaire in his prime, and roared this SOS to his universal fraternity "Are there nor *trrruuue Scortsmen* in tha *hooossse?"*

A whole sentence! Ernie, Veronica, and I were stunned as mullets.

High drama. Nobody stirred.

Mr. Meeks pointed at Withers with skeletal forefinger and intoned this ancient curse: "Those there English gerrrre*nfs* are trampling o'er ma God-gi'en *rrraights!* Theeve used me an' ma pals morst *direly* an' we're inneed of a wee *assistance!"*

Withers growled at us: "Come quiet and face your punishments."

Our captor's southern Englishness was out! A rocker rose like Poseidon and flexed his knuckles. A crane operator stood by him. A sharky-chinned man in a thousand-quid suit. An axwoman with the scars to prove it.

The TV was switched off.

A Highlander spoke softly: "Aye, laddie. We'll nort let ye doone."

Withers assessed the stage and went for *a get real!* smirk. "These men are car thieves."

"You a copper?" The axwoman advanced.

"Show us your badge then." The crane operator advanced.

"Aw, you're full o' shite, man," spat Poseidon.

Coolheadedness might have lost us the day, but Johns Hotchkiss scored a fatal own goal. Finding his way blocked by a pool cue, he prefixed his distress with "Now you just look here, you *grebo,* you can go shag your bloody sporran if you think—" One of his teeth splashed into my Kilmagoon, fifteen feet away. (I fished the tooth out to keep as proof of this unlikely claim, otherwise no one will ever believe me.) Withers caught and snapped an incoming wrist, hurled a wee Krankie over the pool table, but the ogre was one and his enraged foes legion. Oh, the ensuing scene was Trafalgaresque. I must admit, the sight of that brute being brutalized was not wholly unpleasant, but when Withers hit the deck and disfiguring blows began to fall, I proposed a tactful exit stage left to our borrowed vehicle. We departed via the back and scuttled over the blustery car park as fast as our legs, whose combined age well exceeded three centuries, could carry us. I drove. North.

Where all this will end, I do not know.

THE END

Very well, dear Reader, you deserve an epilogue if you've stayed with me this far. My ghastly ordeal touched down in this spotless Edinburgh rooming house, kept by a discreet widow from the Isle of Man. After the brawl at the Hanged Edward, we four blind mice drove to Glasgow, where Ernie knows a bent copper who can take care of the Hotchkiss vehicle. Here our fellowship parted. Ernie, Veronica, and Mr. Meeks waved me off at the station. Ernie promised to take the flak if the law were ever to catch up, as he's too old to stand trial, which is ruddy civilized of him. He and Veronica were headed to a Hebridean location where Ernie's handyman-preacher-cousin does up falling-down crofts for Russian mafiosi and German enthusiasts of the Gaelic tongue. I offer my secular prayers for their well-being. Mr. Meeks was to be deposited in a public library with a "Please Look After This Bear" tag, but I suspect Ernie and Veronica will take him with them. After my arrival at Widow Manx's, I slept under my goosedown quilt as sound as King Arthur on the Blessed Isle. Why didn't I get on the first train south to London, there and then? I'm still not sure. Maybe I recall Denholme's remark about life beyond the M25. I shall never know what part he played in my incarceration, but he

was right—London darkens the map like England's bowel polyp. There is a whole country up here.

I looked up Mrs. Latham's home number at the library. Our telephone reunion was a moving moment. Of course, Mrs. Latham smothered her emotion by lambasting me, before filling me in on my missing weeks. The Hoggins Hydra had ripped the office apart when I failed to show for my three o'clock castration, but years of financial brinkmanship had stood my redoubtable pit prop in good stead. She had captured the vandalism on a cunning video camera supplied by her nephew. The Hogginses were thus restrained: steer clear of Timothy Cavendish, Mrs. Latham warned, or this footage will appear on the Internet and your various probations shall hatch into prison sentences. Thus they were prevailed upon to accept an equitable proposal cutting them into future royalties. (I suspect they had a sneaking admiration for my lady bulldog's cool nerves.) The building management used my disappearance—and the trashing of my suite—as an excuse to turf us out. Even as I write, my former premises are being turned into a Hard Rock Cafe for homesick Americans. Cavendish Publishing is currently run from a house owned by my secretary's eldest nephew, who resides in Tangier. Now for the best news: a Hollywood studio has optioned *Knuckle Sandwich—The Movie* for a figure as senselessly big as the number on a bar code. A lot of the money will go to the Hogginses, but for the first time since I was twenty-two, I am flush.

Mrs. Latham sorted out my bank cards, etc., and I am designing the future on beer mats, like Churchill and Stalin at Yalta, and I must say the future is not too shabby. I shall find a hungry ghostwriter to turn these notes you've been reading into a film script of my own. Well, sod it all, if Dermot "Duster" Hoggins can write a bestseller and have a film made, why the ruddy hell not Timothy "Lazarus" Cavendish? Put Nurse Noakes in the book, the dock, and on the block. The woman was sincere—bigots mostly are—but no less dangerous for that, and she shall be named and shamed. The minor matter of Johns Hotchkiss's vehicle loan needs to be handled with delicacy, but fouler fish have been fried. Mrs. Latham got on the e-mail to Hilary V Hush to express our interest in *Half-Lives,* and the postman delivered part two not an hour ago. A photo was enclosed, and it turns out the V is for Vincent! And what a lard-bucket! I'm no Chippendale myself, but Hilary has the girth to fill not two but three airline economy seats. I'll find out if Luisa Rey is still alive in a corner of the Whistling Thistle, my de facto office and a wrecked galleon of a back-alley tavern where Mary, Queen of Scots, summoned the devil to assist her cause. The landlord, whose double measures would be quadruples in management-consulted Londinium, swears he sees Her ill-starred Majesty regularly. *In vino veritas.*

That is more or less it. Middle age is flown, but it is attitude, not years, that condemns one to the ranks of the Undead, or else proffers salvation. In the domain of the young there dwells many an Undead soul. They rush about so, their inner putrefaction is concealed for a few decades, that is all. Outside, fat snowflakes are falling on slate roofs and granite walls. Like Solzhenitsyn laboring in Vermont, I shall beaver away in exile, far from the city that knitted my bones.

Like Solzhenitsyn, I shall return, one bright dusk.

HALF-LIVES

40

The black sea roars in. Its coldness shocks Luisa's senses back to life. Her VW's rear struck the water at forty-five degrees, so the seat saved her spine, but the car now swings upside down. She is trussed by her seat belt inches from the windshield. *Get out, or die here*. Luisa panics, breathes a lungful of water, and struggles into a pocket of air, coughing. *Unhook this belt*. She squirms and jackknifes up to the belt lock. *Release button*. It doesn't click. The car half-somersaults deeper, and with a wrenching noise, a giant squid-shaped air bubble flies away Luisa stabs the button, frantic, and the strap drifts free. *More air*. She finds an air pocket trapped beneath a windshield of dark water. The sea's mass jams the door shut. *Roll down the window*. It inches halfway and jams, *right where it always jams*. Luisa shimmies around, squeezes her head, shoulders, and torso through the gap.
Sixsmith's Report!
She pulls herself back into the sinking vehicle. *Can't see a damn thing. A plastic trash bag. Wedged under the seat*. She doubles up in the confined space … *It's here*. She hauls, like a woman hauling a sack of rocks. She feeds herself feetfirst back out the window, but the report is too fat. The sinking car drags Luisa down. Her lungs ache now. The sodden papers have quadrupled their weight. The trash bag is through the window, but as she kicks and struggles Luisa feels a lightening. Hundreds of pages spin free from the vanilla binder, wheeling wherever the sea will take them, wheeling around her, *playing cards in* Alice. She kicks off her shoes. Her lungs shriek, curse, beg. Every pulse is a thump in Luisa's ears. *Which way is up?* The water is too murky to guess. *Up is away from the car*. Her lungs will collapse in another moment. *Where's the car?* Luisa realizes she has paid for the Sixsmith Report with her life.

41

Isaac Sachs looks down on a brilliant Pennsylvania morning. Labyrinthine suburbs of ivory mansionettes and silk lawns inset with turquoise swimming pools. The executive-jet window is cool against his face. Six feet directly beneath his seat is a suitcase in the baggage hold containing enough C-4 to turn an airplane into a meteor. *So,* thinks Sachs, *you obeyed your conscience. Luisa Rey has the Sixsmith Report*. He recollects as many details of her face as he can. *Do you feel doubt? Relief? Fear? Righteousness?*
A premonition I'll never see her again.
Alberto Grimaldi, the man he has double-crossed, is laughing at an aide's remark. The hostess

passes with a tray of clinking drinks. Sachs retreats into his notebook, where he writes the following sentences.

• *Exposition: the workings of the actual past + the* virtual *past may be illustrated by an event well known to collective history, such as the sinking of the* Titanic. *The disaster as it* actually *occurred descends into obscurity as its eyewitnesses die off, documents perish + the wreck of the ship dissolves in its Atlantic grave. Yet a* virtual *sinking of the* Titanic, *created from reworked memories, papers, hearsay, fiction—in short, belief—grows ever "truer." The actual past is brittle, ever-dimming + ever more problematic to access + reconstruct: in contrast, the virtual past is malleable, ever-brightening + ever more difficult to circumvent/ expose as fraudulent.*
• *The present presses the virtual past into its own service, to lend credence to its mythologies + legitimacy to the imposition of will. Power seeks +* is *the right to "landscape" the virtual past. (He who pays the historian calls the tune.)*
• *Symmetry demands an actual + virtual* future, *too. We imagine how next week, next year, or 2225 will shape up—a virtual future, constructed by wishes, prophecies + daydreams. This virtual future may influence the actual future, as in a self fulfilling prophecy, but the actual future will eclipse our virtual one as surely as tomorrow eclipses today. Like Utopia, the actual future + the actual past exist only in the hazy distance, where they are no good to anyone.*
• *Q: Is there a meaningful distinction between one simulacrum of smoke, mirrors + shadows —the actual past—from another such simulacrum—the actual future?*
• *One model of time: an infinite matryoshka doll of painted moments, each "shell" (the present) encased inside a nest of "shells" (previous presents) I call the actual past but which we* perceive *as the virtual past. The doll of "now" likewise encases a nest of presents yet to be, which I call the actual future but which we* perceive *as the virtual future.*
• *Proposition: I have fallen in love with Luisa Rey*

The detonator is triggered. The C-4 ignites. The jet is engulfed by a fireball. The jet's metals, plastics, circuitry, its passengers, their bones, clothes, notebooks, and brains all lose definition in flames exceeding 1200 degrees C. The uncreated and the dead exist solely in our actual and virtual pasts. Now the bifurcation of these two pasts will begin.

42

"Betty and Frank needed to shore up their finances," Lloyd Hooks tells his breakfast audience in the Swannekke Hotel. A circle of neophytes and acolytes pays keen attention to the Presidential Energy Guru. "So they decide Bettyd go on the game to get a little cash in hand. Night comes around, Frank drives Betty over to Whore Lane to ply her new trade. 'Hey Frank,' says Betty from the sidewalk. 'How much should I charge?' Frank does the math and tells her, 'A hundred bucks for the whole shebang.' So Betty gets out, and Frank parks down a quiet alley Pretty soon this guy drives up in his beat-up old Chrysler and propositions Betty: 'How much for all night, sugar?' Betty says, 'Hundred dollars.' The guy says, 'I only got thirty dollars. What'll thirty buy me?' So Betty dashes around to Frank and asks him. Frank says, 'Tell him thirty dollars buys a hand job' So Betty goes back to the guy—"

Lloyd Hooks notices Bill Smoke in the background. Bill Smoke raises one, two, three fingers;

the three fingers become a fist; the fist becomes a slashing gesture. *Alberto Grimaldi, dead; Isaac Sachs, dead; Luisa Rey, dead. Swindler, sneak, snoop.* Hooks's eyes tell Smoke he has understood, and a figment from a Greek myth surfaces in his mind. *The sacred grove of Diana was guarded by a warrior priest on whom luxury was lavished but whose tenure was earned by slaying his predecessor. When he slept, it was at the peril of his life. Grimaldi, you dozed for too long.*

"So, anyway, Betty goes back to the guy and says his thirty'll buy a hand job, take it or leave it. The guy says, 'Okay sugar, jump in, I'll take the hand job. Is there a quiet alley around here?' Betty has him drive around the corner to Frank's alley, and the guy unbelts his pants to reveal the most—y know—gargantuan schlong. 'Wait *up*!' gasps Betty 'I'll be right back.' She jumps out of the guy's car and knocks on Frank's window. Frank lowers the window, 'What *now?'*" Hooks pauses for the punch line. "Betty says, 'Frank, hey, Frank, lend this guy seventy dollars!' "

The men who would be board members cackle like hyenas. *Whoever said money can't buy you happiness,* Lloyd Hooks thinks, basking, *obviously didn't have enough of the stuff*

43

Through binoculars Hester Van Zandt watches the divers on their launch. An unhappy-looking barefoot teenager in a poncho ambles along the beach and pats Hester's mongrel. "They found the car yet, Hester? Channel's pretty deep at that point. That's why the fishing's so good there."

"Hard to be sure at this distance."

"Kinda ironic to drown in the sea you're polluting. The guard's kinda got the hots for me. Told me it was a drunk driver, a woman, 'bout four in the morning."

"Swannekke Bridge comes under the same special security remit as the island. Seaboard can say what they like. No one'll cross-check their story"

The teenager yawns. "D'you s'pose she drowned in her car, the woman? Or d'you think she got out and kinda drowned later?"

"Couldn't say."

"If she was drunk enough to drive through a railing, she couldn't have made it to the shore."

"Who knows?"

"Gross way to die." The teenager yawns and walks off. Hester trudges back to her trailer. Milton the Native American sits on its step, drinking from a milk carton. He wipes his mouth and tells her, "Wonder Woman's awake."

Hester steps around Milton and asks the woman on the sofa how she is feeling.

"Lucky to be alive," answers Luisa Rey "full of muffins, and drier. Thanks for the loan of your clothes."

"Lucky we're the same size. Divers are looking for your car."

"The Sixsmith Report, not my car. My body would be a bonus."

Milton locks the door. "So you crashed through a barrier, dropped into the sea, got out of a sinking car, and swam three hundred yards to shore, with no injuries worse than mild bruising."

"It hurts plenty when I think of my insurance claim."

Hester sits down. "What's your next move?"

"Well, first I need to go back to my apartment and get a few things. Then I'll go stay with my mother, on Ewingsville Hill. Then … back to square one. I can't get the police or my editor interested in what's happening on Swannekke without the report."

"Will you be safe at your mother's?"

"As long as Seaboard thinks I'm dead, Joe Napier won't come looking. When they learn I'm not …" She shrugs, having gained an armor of fatalism from the events of the last six hours. "Altogether safe, possibly not. An acceptable degree of risk. I don't do this sort of thing often enough to be an expert."

Milton digs his thumbs into his pockets. "I'll drive you back to Buenas Yerbas. Gimme a minute, I'll go call a friend and get him to bring his pickup over."

"Good guy," says Luisa, after he's left.

"I'd trust Milton with my life," answers Hester.

44

Milton strides over to the flyblown general store that services the campsite, trailer park, beachgoers, traffic to Swannekke, and the isolated houses hereabouts. An Eagles song comes on a radio behind the counter. Milton feeds a dime into the phone, checks the walls for ears, and dials in a number from memory Water vapor rises from the Swannekke cooling towers like malign genies. Pylons march north to Buenas Yerbas and south to Los Angeles. *Funny,* thinks Milton. *Power, time, gravity, love. The forces that really kick ass are all invisible.* The phone is answered. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, Napier? It's me. Listen, about a woman called Luisa *Rey* Well, suppose she isn't? Suppose she's still walking around eating Popsicles and paying utility bills? Would her whereabouts be worth anything to you? Yeah? How much? No, *you* name a figure. Okay, double that … No? Nice talking with you, Napier, I gotta go and"—Milton smirks—"the usual account within one working day, *if you please*. Right. What? No, no one else has seen her, only Crazy Van Zandt. No. She did mention it, but it's in the bottom of the deep blue sea. Quite sure. Fish food. Course not, my exclusives are for your ears only … Uh-huh, I'm driving her back to her apartment, then she's going to her mother's … Okay, I'll make it an hour. The usual account. One working day"

45

Luisa opens her front door to the sounds of a Sunday ball game and the smell of popcorn. "Since when did I say you could fry oil?" she calls through to Javier. "Why are the blinds all down?"

Javier bounces down the hallway grinning. "Hi, Luisa! Your uncle Joe made the popcorn. We're watching Giants versus Dodgers. Why are you dressed like an old woman?"

Luisa feels her core sicken. "Come here. Where is he?"

Javier sniggers. "On your sofa! What's up?"

“Come here! Your mom wants you.”
“She’s working overtime at the hotel.”
“Luisa, it wasn’t me, on the bridge, it wasn’t me!” Joe Napier appears behind him, holding out his palms as if reassuring a scared animal. “Listen—”
Luisa’s voice judders. “Javi! Out! Behind me!”
Napier raises his voice. “Listen to me—”
Yes, I am talking with my own killer. “Why in hell should I listen to a *word* you say?”
“Because I’m the only insider at Seaboard who doesn’t want you dead!” Napier’s calm has deserted him. “In the parking lot, I was trying to warn you! *Think* about it! If I *was* the hit man would we even be having this conversation? Don’t go, for Chrissakes! It’s not safe! Your apartment could be under surveillance still. That’s why the blinds are down.”
Javier looks aghast. Luisa holds the boy but doesn’t know the least dangerous way to turn. “Why are you here?”
Napier is quiet again, but tired and troubled. “I knew your father, when he was a cop. V-J Day on Silvaplana Wharf. Come in, Luisa. Sit down.”

46

Joe Napier calculated that the neighbor’s kid would tether Luisa long enough to make her listen. He’s not proud that his plan paid off. Napier, more a watcher than a speaker, chisels out his sentences with care. “In 1945, I’d been a cop for six years at Spinoza District Station. No commendations, no black marks. A regular cop, keeping his nose clean, dating a regular girl in a typing pool. On the fourteenth of August, the radio said the Japs had surrendered and Buenas Yerbas danced one almighty hula. Drink flowed, cars revved up, firecrackers were set off, people took a holiday even if their bosses didn’t give ’em one. Come nine o’clock or so, my partner and I were called to a hit-and-run in Little Korea. Normally we didn’t bother with that end of town, but the victim was a white kid, so there’d be relatives and questions. We were en route when a Code Eight comes through from your father, calling all available cars to Silvaplana Wharf. Now, the rule of thumb was, you didn’t go snooping around that part of the docks, not if you wanted a career. The mob had their warehouses there, under a city hall umbrella. What’s more, Lester Rey”—Napier decides not to modify his language—“was known as a Tenth Precinct pain-in-the-ass Sunday-school cop. But two officers were down, and that ain’t the same ball game. It could be your buddy bleeding to death on the tarmac. So we flat-outed and reached the wharf just behind another Spinoza car, Brozman and Harkins. Saw nothing at first. No sign of Lester Rey, no sign of a squad car. The dockside lights were off. We drove between two walls of cargo containers, around the corner into a yard where men were loading up an army truck. I was thinking we were in the wrong zone of the docks. Then the wall of bullets hit us. Brozman and Harkins took the first wave—brakes, glass filling the air, our car skidded into theirs, me and my partner rolled out of our car and holed up behind a stack of steel tubes. Brozman’s car horn sounds, doesn’t stop, and they don’t appear. More bullets ack-ack-acking around us, I’m shitting myself—I’d become a cop to *avoid* war zones. My partner starts firing back. I follow his lead, but our chances of hitting anything are zilch. To be honest with you, I was glad when the truck trundled by Dumb ass that I was, I broke cover too soon—to see if I could get a license plate.” The root of Napier’s tongue is aching. “Then all this happenes A yelling man charges me from across the yard. I fire at him. I miss—the

luckiest miss of my life, and yours too, Luisa, because if I'd shot your father you wouldn't be here. Lester Rey is pointing behind me as he sprints by, and he kicks an object rolling my way, lobbed from the back of the truck. Then a blinding light fries me, a noise axes my head, and a needle of pain shoots through my butt. I lay where I fell, half conscious, until I was hoisted into an ambulance."

Luisa still isn't saying anything.

"I was lucky. A fragment of grenade shrapnel tore through both buttock cheeks. The rest of me was fine. The doctor said it was the first time he'd seen one projectile make four holes. Your dad, of course, was not so fine. Lester was a piece of Swiss cheese. They'd operated but failed to save his eye the day before I left the hospital. We just shook hands and I left, I didn't know what to say. The most humiliating thing you can do to a man is to save his life. Lester knew it too. But there's not a day, possibly not an hour, that's gone by without my thinking about him. Every time I sit down."

Luisa says nothing for a while. "Why didn't you tell me this on Swannekke Island?"

Napier scratches his ear. "I was afraid you'd use the connection to squeeze me for juice …"

"On what really happened to Rufus Sixsmith?"

Napier doesn't say yes, doesn't say no. "I know how reporters work."

"*Y ou* are picking holes in *my* integrity?"

She's speaking generally—she can't know about Margo Roker. "If you keep on looking for Rufus Sixsmith's report"—Napier wonders if he should say this in front of the boy—"you'll be killed, plain and simple. Not by me! But it'll happen. Please. Leave town now. Jettison your old life and job, and go."

"Alberto Grimaldi sent you to tell me that, did he?"

"No one knows I'm here—pray God—or I'm in as much trouble as you."

"One question first."

"You want to ask if"—he wishes the kid was elsewhere—"if Sixsmith's 'fate' was my work. The answer is no. That sort of … job, it wasn't my business. I'm not saying I'm innocent. I'm just saying I'm guilty only of looking the other way. Grimaldi's fixer killed Six-smith and drove you off the bridge last night. A man by the name of Bill Smoke—one name of many I suspect. I can't make you believe me, but I hope you will."

"How did you know I'd survived?"

"Vain hope. Look, life is more precious than a damn scoop. I'm begging you, one last time, and it will be the last, to drop this story. Now I've got to leave, and I wish to Christ you'd do the same." He stands. "One last thing. Can you use a gun?"

"I have an allergy to guns."

"How do you mean?"

"Guns make me nauseous. Literally."

"Everyone should learn to use a gun."

"Yeah, you can see crowds of 'em laid out in morgues. Bill Smoke isn't going to wait politely while I get a gun out of my handbag, is he? My only way out is to get evidence that'll blow this affair so totally, killing me would be a pointless act."

"You're underestimating man's fondness for petty revenge."

"What do you care? You've paid back your debt to Dad. You've salved your conscience."

Napier gives a morose sigh. "Enjoyed the ball game, Javi."

"You're a liar," says the boy.

"I lied, yes, but that doesn't make me a liar. Lying's wrong, but when the world spins backwards, a small wrong may be a big right."

"That doesn't make sense."

"You're damn right it doesn't, but it's still true."

Joe Napier lets himself out.
Javier is angry with Luisa, too. "And you act like I'm gambling with my life just because I jump across a couple of balconies?"

47

Luisa's and Javier's footsteps reverberate in the stairwell. Javier peers over the handrail. Lower floors recede like the whorls of a shell. A wind of vertigo blows, making him giddy. It works the same looking upward. "If you could see into the future," he asks, "would you?"
Luisa slings her bag. "Depends on if you could change it or not."
"S'posing you could? So, say you saw you were going to be kidnapped by Communist spies on the second story, youd take the elevator down to the ground floor."
"But what if the spies called the elevator, agreeing to kidnap whoever was in it? What if trying to avoid the future is what triggers it all?"
"If you could *see* the future, like you can see the end of Sixteenth Street from the top of Kilroy's department store, that means it's already there. If it's already there, you can't change it."
"Yes, but what's at the end of Sixteenth Street isn't made by what *you* do. It's pretty much fixed, by planners, architects, designers, unless you go and blow a building up or something. What happens in a minute's time *is* made by what you do."
"So what's the answer? Can you change the future or not?"
Maybe the answer is not a function of metaphysics but one, simply, of power. "It's a great imponderable, Javi."
They have reached the ground floor. *The Six Million Dollar Man's* bionic biceps jangle on Malcolm's TV
"See you, Luisa."
"I'm not leaving town forever, Javi."
At the boy's initiative they shake hands. The gesture surprises Luisa: it feels formal, final, and intimate.

48

A silver carriage clock in Judith Rey's Ewingsville home tinkles one o'clock in the afternoon. Bill Smoke is being talked at by a financier's wife. "This house never fails to bring out the demon of covetousness in me," the fifty-something bejeweled woman confides, "it's a copy of a Frank Lloyd Wright. The original's on the outskirts of Salem, I believe." She is standing an inch too close. *You look like a witch from the outskirts of Salem gone fucking crazy in Tiffany's,* Bill Smoke thinks, remarking, "Now, is that so?"
Hispanic maids supplied by the caterers carry trays of food among the all-white guests. Swan-shaped linen napkins bear place cards. "That white-leafed oak tree on the front lawn would have been here when the Spanish missions were built," the wife says, "wouldn't you agree?"

"Without doubt. Oaks live for six hundred years. Two hundred to grow, two hundred to live, two hundred to die."

Smoke sees Luisa enter the lavish room, accepting a kiss on both cheeks from her stepfather. *What do I want from you, Luisa Rey?* A female guest of Luisa's age hugs her. "Luisa! It's been three or four years!" Close-up, the guest's charm is cattish and prying. "But is it true you're not *married'* yet?"

"I certainly am not" is Luisa's crisp reply "Are *you?"*

Smoke senses she senses his gaze, refocuses his attention on the wife and agrees that, yes, there are redwoods not sixty minutes from here that were mature when Nebuchadnezzar was on his throne. Judith Rey stands on a footstool brought specially for the purpose and taps a silver spoon on a bottle of pink champagne until everyone is listening. "Ladies, gentlemen, and young people," she declaims, "I am told dinner is served! But before we all begin, I'd like to say a few words about the wonderful work done by the Bue-nas Yerbas Cancer Society and how they'll use the moneys from our fund-raiser you are so generously supporting today"

Bill Smoke amuses a pair of children by producing a shiny gold Krugerrand from thin air. *What I want from you, Luisa, is a killing of perfect intimacy*. For a moment Bill Smoke wonders at the powers inside us that are not us.

49

The maids have cleared the dessert course, the air is pungent with coffee fumes, and an overfed Sunday drowsiness settles on the dining room. The eldest guests find nooks to snooze in. Luisa's stepfather rounds up a group of contemporaries to see his collection of 1950s cars, the wives and mothers conduct maneuvers of allusion, the schoolchildren go outside to bicker in the leafy sunshine and around the pool. The Henderson triplets dominate the discourse at the matchmaking table. Each is as blue-eyed and gilded as his brothers, and Luisa doesn't distinguish among them. "What would *I* do," says one triplet, "if *I* was president? First, I'd aim to *win* the Cold War, not just aim not to lose it."

Another takes over. "I *wouldn't* kowtow to Arabs whose ancestors parked camels on lucky patches of sand …"

"… or to red gooks. I'd establish—I'm not afraid to say it—our country's rightful—corporate—empire. Because if we don't do it …"

"… the Japs'll steal the march. The corporation is the future. We need to let business run the country and establish a true meritocracy."

"Not choked by welfare, unions, 'affirmative action' for amputee transvestite colored homeless arachnophobes …"

"A meritocracy of acumen. A culture that is not ashamed to acknowledge that wealth attracts power …"

"… and that the *wealthmakers*—us—are rewarded. When a man aspires to power, I ask one simple question: 'Does he think like a businessman?'"

Luisa rolls her napkin into a compact ball. "I ask three simple questions. How did he get that power? How is he using it? And how can it be taken off the sonofabitch?"

Judith Rey finds Luisa watching an afternoon news report in her husband's den. " 'Bull dyke,' I heard Anton Henderson say, and if it wasn't about you, Cookie, I don't know—it's not funny! Your … rebellion issues are getting *worse*. You complain about being lonely so I introduce you to nice young men, and you 'bull-dyke' them in your *Spyglass* voice."

"When did I ever complain about being lonely?"

"Boys like the Hendersons don't grow on trees, you know."

"Aphids grow on trees."

There is a knock on the door, and Bill Smoke peers in. "Mrs. Rey? Sorry to intrude, but I have to leave soon. Hand on heart, today was the most welcoming, best-organized fund-raiser I've ever attended."

Judith Rey's hand flutters to her ear. "Most kind of you to say so …"

"Herman Howitt, junior partner at Musgrove Wyeland, up from the Malibu office. I didn't get the chance to introduce myself before that superb dinner—I was the last-minute booking this morning. My father passed away over ten years ago—God bless his soul, cancer—I don't know how my mother and I would have gotten through it without the society's help. When Olly mentioned your fund-raiser, just out of the blue, I *had* to call to see if I could replace any last-minute cancellations."

"We're *very* glad you did, and welcome to Buenas Yerbas." *A little short,* assesses Judith Rey, *but muscular, well-salaried and probably on Luisa's side of thirty-five. Junior partner sounds promising*. "I hope Mrs. Howitt can join you next time?"

Bill Smoke a.k.a. Herman Howitt does a mousy smile. "I'm sorry to say, the only Mrs. Howitt is my ma. So far."

"Now is that a fact," responds Judith Rey.

He peers at Luisa, who is not paying attention. "I admired your daughter's principled stand downstairs. So many of our generation seem to lack a moral compass nowadays."

"I *so* agree. The sixties threw out the baby with the bathwater. Luisa's departed father and myself separated some years ago, but we always aimed to instill a sense of right and wrong in our daughter. Luisa! Will you tear yourself away from the television set *for just* a moment, please, dear? Herman will be thinking— Luisa? Cookie, what is it?"

The anchorman intones: "Police confirmed the twelve killed on a Learjet accident over the Allegheny Mountains this morning included Seaboard Power CEO Alberto Grimaldi, America's highest-paid executive. Preliminary reports from FAA investigators suggest an explosion triggered by a defect in the fuel system. Wreckage is strewn over several square miles …"

"Luisa, Cookie?" Judith Rey kneels by her daughter, who stares aghast at pictures of twisted airplane pieces on a mountainside.

"How … *appalling!"* Bill Smoke savors a complex dish, all of whose ingredients even he, the chef, can't list. "Did you *know* any of those poor souls, Miss Rey?"

Monday morning. The *Spyglass* newsroom swarms with rumors. One has it the magazine is bust; another, that Kenneth P. Ogilvy its owner, will auction it off; the bank is giving a fresh transfusion; the bank is pulling the plug. Luisa hasn't informed anyone that she survived a murder attempt twenty-four hours ago. She doesn't want to involve her mother or Grelsch, and except for her bruising, it is all increasingly unreal.

Luisa does feel grief over the death of Isaac Sachs, a man she hardly knew. She is also afraid but focuses on work. Her father told her how war photographers refer to an immunity from fear bestowed by the camera lens; this morning it makes perfect sense. *If Bill Smoke knew about Isaac Sachs's defection, his death makes sense—but who wanted Alberto Grimaldi taken down at the same time?* The staff writers gravitate into Dom Grelsch's office as usual for the ten o'clock meeting. Ten-fifteen comes around.

"Grelsch wasn't this late even when his first wife gave birth," says Nancy O'Hagan, polishing her nails. "Ogilvy's got him screwed into an instrument of torture."

Roland Jakes gouges wax from his ear with a pencil. "I met the drummer who'd done the actual drumming on the Monkees' hits. He was banging on about tantric sex—I thank you. His favorite position is, uh, called 'the Plumber.' You stay in all day but nobody comes."

Silence.

"Jeez, just trying to lighten the vibes."

Grelsch arrives and wastes no time. "*Spyglass* is being sold. We'll learn later today who'll survive the sacrificial cull."

Jerry Nussbaum loops his thumbs through his belt. "Sudden."

"Damn sudden. Negotiations began late last week." Grelsch simmers. "By this morning it was a done deal."

"Must have been, uh, one helluvan offer," angles Jakes.

"Ask KPO that."

"Who's the buyer?" asks Luisa.

"Press announcement later today"

"Come on, Dom," wheedles O'Hagan.

"I said, there'll be a press announcement later today."

Jakes rolls a cigarette. "Seems like our mystery buyer, uh, *really* wants *Spyglass,* and uh, if it ain't broken, don't fix it."

Nussbaum snorts. "Who says our mystery buyer doesn't think we're broken? When Allied News bought *Nouveau* last year, they even fired the window cleaners."

"So." O'Hagan clicks her compact shut. "My cruise up the Nile is off again. Back to my sister-in-law's in Chicago for Christmas. Her brats and the frozen-beef capital of the world. What a difference a day makes."

52

For months, Joe Napier realizes, looking at the coordinated artwork in vice CEO William Wiley's anteroom, he has been sidelined. Loyalties snaked out of sight, and power was tapped from the known ducts. *That was fine by me,* Napier thinks, *only a year and a half to go*. He hears footsteps and feels a draft. *But downing an airplane with twelve men onboard isn't security, it's multiple homicide. Who gave the order? Was Bill Smoke working for Wiley? Could it just be an aviation accident? They happen. All I understand is that not understanding*

is dangerous. Napier berates himself for warning off Luisa Rey yesterday, a stupid risk that achieved a big nothing.

William Wiley's secretary appears at the door. "Mr. Wiley will see you now, Mr. Napier."

Napier is surprised to see Fay Li in the office. The setting demands an exchange of smiles. William Wiley's "Joe! How are ya?" is as vigorous as his handshake.

"A sad morning, Mr. Wiley," replies Napier, taking the seat but refusing the cigarette. "I still can't take it in about Mr. Grimaldi." *I never liked you. I never saw what you were for.*

"None sadder. Alberto can be succeeded, but never replaced."

Napier permits himself one question under the guise of small talk. "How long will the board leave it before discussing a new appointment?"

"We're meeting this afternoon. Alberto wouldn't want us to drift without a helmsman for longer than necessary You know, his respect for you, personally, was … well …"

"Devout," suggests Fay Li.

You have *come up in the world,* Mister *Li*.

"Precisely! Exactly! Devout."

"Mr. Grimaldi was a great guy."

"He sure was, Joe, he sure was." Wiley turns to Fay Li. "Fay. Let's tell Joe about the package we're offering."

"In recognition of your exemplary record, Mr. Wiley is proposing to set you free early. You'll receive full pay for the eighteen months still on your contract, your bonus—then your index-linked pension will kick in."

Walk the plank! Napier makes a "wow" expression. *Bill Smoke is behind this. Wow* fits both the retirement offer and Napier's sense of the seismic shift in his role from insider to liability "This is … unexpected."

"Must be, Joe," says Wiley but adds nothing. The telephone rings. "No," snaps Wiley into the mouthpiece, "Mr. Reagan can wait his turn. I'm busy."

Napier has decided by the time Wiley hangs up. *A golden chance to exit a bloodstained stage*. He plays an old retainer speechless with gratitude. "Fay Mr. Wiley. I don't know how to thank you."

William Wiley peers like a jokey coyote. "By accepting?"

"Of course I accept!"

Wiley and Fay Li are all congratulations. "You understand, of course," Wiley continues, "with a post as delicate as Security we need for the change to come into force when you leave this room."

Jesus, you people don't waste a second, do you?

Fay Li adds, "I'll have your effects shipped on, plus paperwork. I know you won't be offended by an escort to the mainland. Mr. Wiley has to be seen to respect protocol."

"No offense, Fay." Napier smiles, cursing her. "I wrote our protocol." *Napier, keep your .38 strapped to your calf until you're off Swannekke, and for a long time after.*

53

The music in the Lost Chord Music Store subsumes all thoughts of *Spyglass,* Sixsmith, Sachs, and Grimaldi. The sound is pristine, riverlike, spectral, hypnotic … *intimately familiar*. Luisa stands, entranced, as if living in a stream of time. "I *know* this music," she tells the store clerk,

who eventually asks if she's okay. "What the hell is it?"
"I'm sorry, it's a customer order, not for sale. I shouldn't really be playing it."
"Oh." *First things first*. "I phoned last week. My name's Rey Luisa Rey You said you could find an obscure recording for me by Robert Frobisher, *Cloud Atlas Sextet*. But forget that for a moment. I have to own this music too. I *have* to. You know what it's like. What is it?"
The clerk presents his wrists for imaginary handcuffs. *"Cloud Atlas Sextet* by Robert Frobisher. I listened to it to make sure it's not scratched. Oh, I lie. I listened to it because I'm a slave to curiosity Not exactly Delius, is it? Why companies won't finance recordings of gems like this, it's criminal. Your record is in the mintest condition, I'm happy to report."
"Where have I heard it before?"
The young man shrugs. "Can't be more than a handful in North America."
"But I know it. I'm telling you I *know*

54

Nancy O'Hagan is speaking excitedly on her phone when Luisa returns to the office. "Shirl? Shirl! It's Nancy. Listen, we may yet spend Christmas in the shadow of the Sphinx. The new owner is Trans Vision Inc."—she raises her voice—*"Trans Vision Inc*…. Me neither, but"—O'Hagan lowers her voice—"I've just seen KPO, yeah, the old boss, he's on the new board. But listen up, what I'm calling to say is, my job's safe!" She gives Luisa a frenetic nod. "Uh-huh, almost no jobs are being axed, so phone Janine and tell her she's spending Christmas alone with her abominable little snowmen."
"Luisa," Grelsch calls from his doorway, "Mr. Ogilvy'll see you now."
K. P. Ogilvy occupies Dom Grelsch's temperamental chair, exiling the editor to a plastic stacking seat. In the flesh, *Spyglass's* proprietor reminds Luisa of a steel engraving. Of a Wild West judge. "There's no nice way to say this," he begins, "so I'll just say it the blunt way. You're fired. Orders of the new owner."
Luisa watches the news bounce off her. *No, it can't compare to being driven off a bridge into the sea in semidarkness*. Grelsch can't meet her eye. "I've got a contract."
"Who hasn't? You're fired."
"Am I the only staff writer to incur your new masters' displeasure?"
"So it would seem." K. P. Ogilvy's jaw flinches once.
"I think it's fair to ask, 'Why me?' "
"Owners hire, fire, and say what's fair. When a buyer offers a rescue package of the bounty that Trans Vision offered, one doesn't nitpick."
" 'A Picked Nit.' Can I have that on my gold watch?"
Dom Grelsch squirms. "Mr. Ogilvy I think Luisa's entitled to some kind of an explanation."
"Then she can go ask Trans Vision. Perhaps her face doesn't fit their vision of *Spyglass*. Too radical. Too feminist. Too dry. Too pushy."
He's trying to make a smokescreen."I'd like to ask Trans Vision a number of things. Where's their head office?"
"Out east somewhere. But I doubt anyone'll see you."
"Out east somewhere. Who are your new fellow board members?"
"You're being fired, not taking down an affidavit."
"Just one more question, Mr. Ogilvy For three magical years of unstinting service, just answer

this—what's the overlap between Trans Vision and Seaboard Power?"
Dom Grelsch's own curiosity is sharp. Ogilvy hesitates a fraction, then blusters, "I've got a lot of work to get through. You'll be paid until the end of the month, no need to come in. Thank you and good-bye."
Where there's bluster, thinks Luisa, *there's duplicity*.

55

YOU ARE NOW LEAVING SWANNEKKE COUNTY,

HOME OF THE SURF, HOME OF THE ATOM,

DON'T STAY AWAY TOO LONG!

Life's okay. Joe Napier shifts his Jeep into cruise control. *Life's good*. Seaboard Power, his working life, Margo Roker, and Luisa Rey recede into his past at eighty miles per hour.*Life's great*. Two hours to his log cabin in the Santo Cristo mountains. He could catch catfish for supper if he's not too tired by the drive. He checks his mirror: a silver Chrysler has been sitting a hundred yards behind him for a mile or two, but now it overtakes and vanishes into the distance. *Relax,* Napier tells himself, *you've gotten away*. Something in his Jeep is rattling. The afternoon reaches its three o'clock golden age. The freeway runs alongside the river for mile after mile, slowly climbing. *Upcountry's gotten uglier in the last thirty years, but show me a place that hasn't*. Either side, housing developments colonize the bulldozer-leveled shelves. *Getting out took me all my life*. Buenas Yerbas dwindles to a bristling smudge in Napier's rearview mirror. *You can't stop Lester's daughter playing Wonder Woman. You gave it your best shot. Let her go. She ain't a kid.* He sifts the radio waves, but it's all men singing like women and women singing like men, until he finds a hokey country station playing "Everybody's Talkin'." Milly was the musical half of his marriage. Napier revisits the first evening he saw her: she was playing fiddle for Wild Oakum Hokum and His Cowgirls in the Sand. The glances musicians exchange, when music is effortless, that was what he wanted from Milly, that intimacy *Luisa Rey is too a kid*. Napier turns off at exit eighteen and takes the

old gold miners' road up toward Copperline. *That rattling isn't getting any better*. Fall is licking the mountain woods up here. The road follows a gorge under ancient pines to where the sun goes down.

He's here, all of a sudden, unable to recall a single thought from the last three-quarters of an hour. Napier pulls over at the grocery store, kills the engine, and swings out of his Jeep. *Hear that rushing? The Lost River*. It reminds him Copperline isn't Buenas Yerbas, and he unlocks his Jeep again. The store owner greets his customer by name, delivers six months' gossip in as many minutes, and asks if Napier's on vacation for the whole week.

"I'm on permanent vacation now. I was offered early"—he's never used the word on himself before—"retirement. Took it like a shot."

The store owner's gaze is all-seeing. "Celebration at Duane's tonight? Or commiseration at Duane's tomorrow?"

"Make it Friday Celebration, mostly. I want to spend my first week of freedom resting in my cabin, not poleaxed under Duane's tables." Napier pays for his groceries and leaves, suddenly hungry to be alone. The Jeep's tires crunch the stony track. Its headlights illuminate the primeval forest in bright, sweeping moments.

Here. Once again, Napier hears the Lost River. He remembers the first time he brought Milly up to the cabin he, his brothers, and his dad built. Now he's the last one left. They went skinny-dipping that night. The forest dusk fills his lungs and his head. No phones, no CCTV or just TV, no ID clearances, no meetings in the president's soundproofed office. Not ever again. The retired security man checks the padlock on the door for signs of tampering before he opens the shutters. *Relax, for Chrissakes. Seaboard let you go, free, no strings, no comeback*. Nonetheless his .38 is in his hand as he enters the cabin. *See? Nobody*. Napier gets a fire crackling and fixes himself beans and sausages and sooty baked potatoes. A couple of beers. A long, long piss outdoors. The fizzing Milky Way. A deep, deep sleep.

Awake, again, parched, with a beer-swollen bladder. *Fifth time now or sixth?* The sounds of the forest don't lullaby Napier tonight but itch his sense of well-being. A car's brakes? *An elf owl*. Twigs snapping? *A rat, a mountain quail, I don't know, you're in a forest, it could be anything. Go to sleep, Napier*. The wind. *Voices under the window?* Napier wakes to find a cougar crouched on a crossbeam over his bed; he wakes up with a yell; the cougar was Bill Smoke, arm poised to stove Napier's head in with a flashlight; nothing on the crossbeam. *Is it raining this time?* Napier listens.

Only the river, only the river.

He lights another match to see if it's a time worth getting up for: 4:05. No. An in-between hour. Napier nestles down in folded darkness for holes of sleep, but recent memories of Margo Roker's house find him. Bill Smoke saying, *Stand guard. My contact says she keeps her documents in her room*. Napier agreeing, glad to reduce his involvement. Bill Smoke switching on his hefty rubber flashlight and going upstairs.

Napier scanning Roker's orchard. The nearest house was over half a mile away. Wondering why the solo operator Bill Smoke wanted him along for this simple job.

A frail scream. An abrupt ending.

Napier running upstairs, slipping, a series of empty rooms.

Bill Smoke kneeling on an antique bed, clubbing something on the bed with his flashlight, the beam whipping the walls and ceiling, the near-noiseless thump as it lands on the senseless head of Margo Roker. Her blood on the bedsheets—obscenely scarlet and wet.

Napier, shouting for him to stop.

Bill Smoke turned around, huffing. *Wassup, Joe?*

You said she was out tonight!
No, no, you heard wrong. I said my contact said the old woman was out tonight. Reliable staff, hard to find.
Christ, Christ, Christ, is she dead?
Better safe than sorry, Joe.
A neat little setup, Joe Napier admits in his sleepless cabin. A shackle of compliance. Party to the clubbing of a defenseless, elderly activist? Any dropout law student with a speech impediment could send him to prison for the rest of his life. A blackbird sings. *I did a great wrong by Margo Roker, but I've left that life.* Four small shrapnel scars, two in each buttock, ache. *I went out on a limb to get Luisa Rey wised up.* The window is light enough to discern Milly in her frame. *I'm only one man,* he protests. *I'm not a platoon. All I want out of life is life. And a little fishing.*
Joe Napier sighs, dresses, and begins reloading the Jeep.
Milly always won by saying nothing.

56

Judith Rey, barefoot, fastens her kimono-style dressing gown and crosses a vast Byzantine rug to her marble-floored kitchen. She takes out three ruby grapefruits from a cavernous refrigerator, halves them, then feeds the snow-cold dripping hemispheres into a juicer. The machine buzzes like trapped wasps, and a jug fills with pulpy, pearly, candy-colored juice. She pours herself a heavy blue glass and slooshes the liquid around every nook of her mouth.
On the striped veranda sofa, Luisa scans the paper and chews a croissant. The magnificent view—over Ewingsville's moneyed roofs and velveteen lawns to downtown Buenas Yerbas, where skyscrapers rear from sea mist and commuter smog—has an especial otherworldliness at this hour.
"Not sleeping in, Cookie?"
"Morning. No, I'm going to collect my stuff from the office, if you don't mind me borrowing one of the cars again."
"Sure." Judith Rey reads her daughter. "You were wasting your talents at *Spyglass,* Cookie. It was a squalid little magazine."
"True, Mom, but it was *my* squalid little magazine."
Judith Rey settles on the arm of the sofa and shoos an impertinent fly from her glass. She examines a circled article in the business section.

"ENERGY GURU" lloyd hooks
to head seaboard inc.

In a joint statement, the White House and electricity giant Seaboard Power Inc. have

announced Federal Power Commissioner Lloyd Hooks is to fill the CEO's seat left vacant by Alberto Grimaldi's tragic death in an airplane accident two days ago. Seaboard's share price on Wall Street leaped 40 points in response to the news. "We're delighted Lloyd has accepted our offer to come onboard," said Seaboard vice CEO William Wiley, "and while the circumstances behind the appointment couldn't be sadder, the board feels Alberto in heaven joins with us today as we extend the warmest welcome to a visionary new chief executive." Menzies Graham, Power Commission spokesman, said, "Lloyd Hooks's expertise will obviously be missed here in Washington, but President Ford respects his wishes and looks forward to an ongoing liaison with one of the finest minds tackling today's energy challenges and keeping our great nation great." Mr. Hooks is to take up his new responsibilities next week. His successor is due to be announced later today.

"Is this a project you were working on?" asks Judith.

"Still am."

"On whose behalf?"

"On behalf of the truth." Her daughter's irony is sincere. "I'm freelance."

"Since when?"

"Since the moment KPO fired me. Firing me was a political decision, Mom. It proves I was onto something big. Mammoth."

Judith Rey watches the young woman. *Once upon a time, I had a baby daughter. I dressed her in frilly frocks, enrolled her for ballet classes, and sent her to horse-riding camp five summers in a row. But look at her. She turned into Lester anyway.* She kisses Luisa's forehead. Luisa frowns, suspiciously, like a teenager. "What?"

57

Luisa Rey drops into the Snow White Diner for the last coffee of her *Spyglass* days. The only free seat is adjacent to a man hidden behind the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Luisa thinks, *A good paper,* and takes the seat. Dom Grelsch says, "Morning."

Luisa feels a flare of territorial jealousy "What are you doing here?"

"Even editors eat. I've come here every morning since my wife's … y know. Waffles I can make in the toaster but …" His gesture at his platter of pork chops implies, *Need I say more?*

"I never saw you in here once."

"That's 'cause he leaves," says Bart, performing three tasks at once, "an hour before you arrive. Usual, Luisa?"

"Please. How come you never told me, Bart?"

"I don't talk about *your* comings and goings to no one else either."

"First one into the office"—Dom Grelsch folds the newspaper—"last one out at night. Editor's lot. I wanted a word with you, Luisa."

"I have a distinct memory of having been fired."

"Can it, willya? I want to say why—how—I'm not resigning over how Ogilvy crapped on you. And since my confessions are rolling out, I knew you were in for the ax since last Friday."

"Nice of you to let me know beforehand."

The editor lowers his voice. "You know about my wife's leukemia. Our insurance situation?"

Luisa decides to grant him a nod.

Grelsch steels himself. "Last week, during the takeover negotiations … it was intimated, if I stayed on at *Spyglass* and agreed I'd never heard … of a certain report, strings could be pulled at my insurers."

Luisa maintains her composure. "You trust these people to keep their word?"

"On Sunday morning my claims man, Arnold Frum, phones. Apologies for disturbing us, blah-blah, but he thought we'd want to know Blue Shield reversed their decision and will be handling all my wife's medical bills. A reimbursement check for past payments is in the mail. We even get to keep our house. I'm not proud of myself, but I won't be ashamed for putting my family ahead of the truth."

"The truth is radiation raining on Buenas Yerbas."

"We all make choices about levels of risk. If I can protect my wife in return for playing a bit part in the *chance* of an accident at Swannekke, well, I'll have to live with that. I sure as hell wish you'd think a little more about the risk you're exposing *your*self to by taking these people on."

Luisa's memory of sinking under water returns to haunt her, and her heart lurches. Bart places a cup of coffee in front of her.

Grelsch slips a typewritten page over the counter. It contains two columns of seven names per column. "Guess what this list is." Two names jump out: Lloyd Hooks and William Wiley.

"Board members of Trans Vision Inc.?"

Grelsch nods. "Almost. Board membership is a matter of public knowledge. This is a list of unlisted corporate advisers who receive money sourced in Trans Vision Inc. The circled names should interest you. Look. Hooks *and* Wiley. Lazy damning, just plain greedy."

Luisa pockets the list. "I should thank you for this."

"Nussbaum the Foul did the digging. One last thing. Fran Peacock, at the *Western Messenger,* you know her?"

"Just to say hi at superficial media parties."

"Fran and me go back a ways. I dropped by her office last night, mentioned your story's salient points. I was noncommittal, but once you've got battleworthy evidence she'd like to say more than just hi."

"Is this in the spirit of your understanding with Trans Vision Inc.?"

Grelsch stands up and folds his newspaper. "They never said I couldn't share my contacts."

58

Jerry Nussbaum returns the car keys to Luisa. "Dear God in Heaven, let me be reincarnated as your mother's sports car. I don't care which one. That's the last of the boxes?"

"Yep," says Luisa, "and thanks."

Nussbaum shrugs like a modest maestro. "The place'll sure feel empty without a real woman to crack chauvinist jokes on. Nance is actually a man after so many decades in a newsroom."

Nancy O'Hagan thumps her jammed typewriter and gives Nussbaum the finger.

"Yeah, like"—Roland Jakes surveys Luisa's empty desk, glumly—"I still don't believe how, y know, the new guys'd give you the high jump but keep on a mollusk like Nussbaum."

Nancy O'Hagan hisses, cobralike, "How can *Grelsch"*—she jabs her cigar at his office—"just roll over waving his feet in the air and let KPO stiff you like that?"

"Wish me luck."
"Luck?" Jakes scoffs. "You don't need luck. Don't know why you stayed with this dead shark for so long. The seventies is gonna see satire's dying gasp. It's true what Lehrer said. A world that'll award Henry Kissinger the Nobel Peace Prize throws us *all* out of a job."
"Oh," Nussbaum remembers, "I came back via the mailroom. Something for you." He hands Luisa a padded khaki envelope. She doesn't recognize the crabbed, looping script. She slits open the envelope. Inside is a safety-deposit key, wrapped in a short note. Luisa's expression intensifies as her eyes move down the note. She double-checks the label on the key. "Third Bank of California, Ninth Street. Where's that?"
"Downtown," answers O'Hagan, "where Ninth crosses Flanders Boulevard."
"Catch you all next time." Luisa is going. "It's a small world. It keeps recrossing itself."

59

Waiting for the lights to change, Luisa glances once more at Six-smith's letter to triple-check she hasn't missed anything. It was written in a hurried script.

B.Y. International Airport,
3rd—ix—1975

Dear Miss Rey,
Forgive this scribbled note. I have been warned by a well-wisher at Seaboard I am in imminent danger of my life. Exposing the HYDRA-Zero's defects calls for excellent health, so I will act on this tip-off I will be in touch with you as soon as I can from Cambridge or via the IAEA. In the meantime, I have taken the liberty of depositing my report on Swan-nekke B in a strongbox at the Third Bank of California on Ninth Street. You will need it should anything happen to me.
Be careful.

In haste,

R.S.

Angry horns blast as Luisa fumbles with the unfamiliar transmission. After Thirteenth Street the city loses its moneyed Pacific character. Carob trees, watered by the city give way to buckled streetlights. Joggers do not pant down these side streets. The neighborhood could be from any manufacturing zone in any industrial belt. Bums doze on benches, weeds crack the sidewalk, skins get darker block by block, flyers cover barricaded doors, graffiti spreads across every surface below the height of a teenager holding a spray can. The garbage collectors are on strike, again, and mounds of rubbish putrefy in the sun. Pawnshops, nameless laundromats, and grocers scratch a lean living from threadbare pockets. After more blocks and streetlights, the shops give way to anonymous manufacturing firms and housing projects. Luisa has never

even driven through this district and feels unsettled by the unknowability of cities. *Was Sixsmith's logic to hide his report and then hide the hiding place?* She comes to Flanders Boulevard and sees the Third Bank of California dead ahead, with a customers' parking lot around the side. Luisa doesn't notice the battered black Chevy parked across the street.

60

Fay Li, in visor sunglasses and a sunhat, checks her watch against the bank's clock. The air-conditioning is losing its battle against the midmorning heat. She dabs perspiration from her face and forearms with a handkerchief, fans herself, and assesses recent developments. *Joe Napier, you look dumb but you're deep-down smart, smart enough to know when to bow out.* Luisa Rey should be here any time now, if Bill Smoke was on the money. *Bill Smoke, you look smart but you're deep-down dumb, and your men aren't as loyal as you think. Because* you *don't do it for the money, you forgot how easily lesser mortals can be bought.*

Two well-dressed Chinese men walk in. A look from one tells her Luisa Rey is coming. The three converge at a desk guarding a side corridor: SAFETY DEPOSIT BOXES. This facility has had very little traffic all morning. Fay Li considered getting a plant in place, but a minimum-wage rent-a-guard's natural laxness is safer than giving Triad men a sniff of the prize.

"Hi"—Fay Li fires off her most intolerable Chinese accent at the guard—"brothers and I want get from strongbox." She dangles a deposit-box key. "Looky we got key."

The bored youth has a bad skin problem. "ID?"

"ID here, you looky, ID you looky"

The Chinese ideograms repel white scrutiny with their ancient tribal magic. The guard nods down the corridor and returns to his *Aliens!* magazine. "Door's not locked." *I'd fire your ass on the spot, kid,* thinks Fay Li.

The corridor ends at a reinforced door, left ajar. Beyond is the deposit-box room, shaped like a three-pronged fork. One associate joins her up the left prong, and she orders the other down the right. *About six hundred boxes in here. One of them hides a five-million-dollar, ten-thousand-bucks-per-page report.*

Footsteps approach down the corridor. *Clipping, female heels.*

The vault door swings open. "Anyone here?" calls Luisa Rey.

Silence.

As the door clangs shut, the two men rush the woman. Luisa is gripped with a hand over her mouth. "Thank you." Fay Li prizes the key from the reporter's fingers. Its engraved number is 36/64. She wastes no words. "Bad news. This room is soundproof, unmoni-tored, and my friends and I are armed. The Sixsmith Report isn't destined for your hands. Good news. I'm acting for clients who want the HYDRA strangled at birth and Seaboard discredited. Sixsmith's findings will hit the news networks within two or three days. Whether they want to pursue the corporate executions is their business. Don't look at me like that, Luisa. Truth doesn't care who discovers it, so why should you? Even better news. Nothing bad will happen to you. My associate will escort you to a holding location in B.Y. By evening, you'll be a free woman. You won't cause us any trouble"—Fay Li produces a photo of Javier from Luisa's bulletin board and waves it an inch from her face—"because we'd reciprocate in kind."

Submission replaces defiance in Luisa's eyes.

"I knew you had a fine head on your shoulders." Fay Li addresses the man holding Luisa in Cantonese. "Take her to the lockup. Nothing dirty before you shoot her. She may be a reporter, but that doesn't make her a total whore. Dispose of the body in the usual way"

They leave. The second associate remains by the door, holding it ajar.

Fay Li locates strongbox 36/64 at neck height, at the tip of the middle prong.

The key turns, and the door swings open.

Fay Li pulls out a vanilla binder. *The HYDRAZero Reactor—An Operational Assessment Model—Project Head Dr. Rufus Sixsmith—Unauthorized Possession Is a Federal Crime Under the Military & Industrial Espionage Act 1971.* Fay Li permits herself a jubilant smile. *The land of opportunity.* Then she sees two wires trailing from inside the binder to the back of the strongbox. She peers in. A red diode blinks on a neat four-by-two bundle of taped cylinders, wires, components.

Bill Smoke, you goddamn—

61

The blast picks Luisa Rey up and throws her forward, irresistibly, like a Pacific breaker. The corridor rotates through ninety degrees—several times—and pounds into Luisa's ribs and head. Petals of pain unfold across her vision. Masonry groans. Chunks of plaster, tile, and glass shower, drizzle, stop.

An ominous peace. *What am I living through?* Calls for help spring up in the dust and smoke, screams from the street, alarm bells drill the burnt air. Luisa's mind reactivates. *A bomb.* The rent-a-guard croaks and moans. Blood from his ear trickles into a delta flooding his shirt collar. Luisa tries to pull herself away, but her right leg has been blown off.

The shock dies; her leg is just jammed under her unconscious Chinese escort. She pulls free and crawls, stiff and hurting, across the lobby, now transformed into a movie set. Luisa finds the vault door, blown off its hinges. *Must have missed me by inches.* Broken glass, upended chairs, chunks of wall, cut and shocked people. Oily black smoke belches from the ducts, and a sprinkler system kicks in— Luisa is drenched and choked, slips on the wet floor and stumbles, dazed, bent double, into others.

A friendly hand takes Luisa's wrist. "I got you, ma'am, I got you, let me help you outside, there may be another explosion."

Luisa allows herself to be led into congested sunlight, where a wall of faces looks on, hungry for horror. The fireman guides her across a road blocked with gridlocked cars, and she is reminded of April's war footage from Saigon. Smoke still spills in senseless quantities. "Get away! Over here! Get back! Over there!" Luisa the journalist is trying to tell Luisa the victim something. She has grit in her mouth. Something urgent. She asks her rescuer, "How did you get on the scene so soon?"

"It's okay," he insists, "you have a concussion."

A fireman? "I can make my own way now—"

"No, you'll be safe this way—"

The door of a dusty black Chevy swings open.

"Let go of me!"

His grip is iron. "In the car now," he mutters, "or I'll blow your fucking brains out."

The bomb was supposed to get me, and now—

Luisa's abductor grunts and falls forward.

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Joe Napier grabs Luisa Rey s arm and swings her away from the Chevy. *Christ, that was close! A* baseball bat is in his other hand. "If you want to live to see the day out, youd better come with me."

Okay, thinks Luisa. "Okay" she says.

Napier pulls her back into the jockeying crowd to block Bill Smoke's line of fire, hands the baseball bat to a bewildered boy, and marches toward Eighty-first Avenue, away from the Chevy. *Walk discreetly; or run for it and break your cover?*

"My car's next to the bank," says Luisa.

"We'll be sitting ducks in this traffic," says Napier. "Bill Smoke's got two more ape-men, they'll just fire through the window. Can you walk?"

"I can run, Napier."

They advance a third of the way down the block, but then Napier makes out Bill Smoke's face ahead, his hand hovering around his jacket pocket. Napier checks behind him. A second goon is the second pincer. Across the road is a third. There won't be any cops on the scene for minutes yet, and they have mere seconds. Two killings in broad daylight: risky, but the stakes are high enough for them to chance it, and there's so much chaos here, they'll get away with it. Napier is desperate: they are level with a windowless warehouse. "Up these steps," he tells Luisa, praying the door opens.

It does.

A sparse reception area, shady and lit by a single tube, a tomb of flies. Napier bolts the door behind them. From behind a desk, a young girl in her Sunday best and an aged poodle in a cardboard box bed watch, unperturbed. Three exits at the far end. The noise of machinery is monolithic.

A black-eyed Mexican woman swoops from nowhere and flutters in his face: "No 'llegals here! No 'llegals here! Bossaway! Boss-away! Come back 'notherday!"

Luisa Rey addresses her in very battered Spanish. The Mexican woman glares, then jerks a savage thumb at the exits. A blow crunches the outer door. Napier and Luisa run across the echoing chamber. "Left or right?" demands Napier.

"Don't know!" gasps Luisa.

Napier looks back for guidance from the Mexican, but the street door shudders under one blow, splinters under the next, and flies open with the third. Napier pulls Luisa through the left exit.

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Bisco and Roper, Bill Smoke's sidemen, body-charge the door. In the courtroom of his head, Bill Smoke finds William Wiley and Lloyd Hooks guilty of gross negligence. *I told you! Joe Napier couldn't be trusted to pack up his conscience and pick up his fishing rods.*

The door is in pieces.
A spidery Mexican woman inside is having hysterics. A placid child and a bedecked poodle sit on an office desk. “FBI!” Bisco yells, flourishing his driver’s license. “Which way did they go?”
The Mexican woman screeches: “We care our workers! Very good! Very much pay! No need union!”
Bisco takes out his gun and blasts the poodle against the wall. “Which way did they fucking go?”
Jesus Muhammad Christ, this is why I work alone.
The Mexican woman bites her fist, shudders, and launches a rising wail.
“Brilliant, Bisco, like the FBI kills poodles.” Roper leans over the child, who hasn’t responded in any way to the death of the dog. “Which exit did the man and the woman take?”
She gazes back as if he is nothing but a pleasant sunset.
“You speak English?”
A hysteric, a mute, a dead dog—Bill Smoke walks to the three exits— *and a pair of fuckups royale*. “We’re losing time! Roper, right door. Bisco, left. I’m the middle.”

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Rows, aisles, and ten-box-high walls of cardboard conceal the true dimensions of the storeroom. Napier wedges the door shut with a cart. “Tell me you’ve gotten over your gun allergy since yesterday,” he hisses.
Luisa shakes her head. “You?”
“Only a popgun. Six shots. C’mon.”
Even as they run, she hears the door being forced. Napier blocks the line of vision with a tower of boxes. Then again, a few yards down. A third tower topples ahead of them, however, and dozens of Big Birds—Luisa recognizes the dimwit yellow emu from the children’s program Hal used to watch between jobs—spill free. Napier gestures: *Run with your head down.*
Five seconds later a bullet rips through cardboard three inches shy of Luisa’s head, and Big Bird stuffing poofs into her face. She trips and collides with Napier; a rod of noise sears the air above them. Napier draws his gun and fires twice around Luisa. The noise makes her curl into a ball. “Run!” barks Napier, grabbing her upright. Luisa obeys—Napier starts knocking down walls of boxes to impede their pursuer.
Ten yards later Luisa gets to a corner. A plywood door is marked EMERGENCY EXIT. Locked. Breathless, Joe Napier reaches her. He fails to force the door.
“Give it up, Napier!” they hear. “It’s not you we’re after!”
Napier fires point-blank at the lock.
The door still won’t open. He empties three more bullets into the lock: each bang makes Luisa flinch. The fourth bang is an empty click. Napier kicks the door with the sole of his boot.
An underworld sweatshop clattering with five hundred sewing machines. Flakes of textile are suspended in the viscous heat, haloing the naked bulbs hanging over each machinist. Luisa and Napier skirt the outer walkway in a rapid semicrouch. Limp Donald Ducks and crucified Scooby-Doos have their innards stitched, one by one, row by row, pallet by pallet. Each woman keeps her eyes fixed on the needle plates, so Luisa and Napier cause little commotion.
But how do we get out of here?
Napier runs, literally, into the Mexican woman from the makeshift reception. She beckons them

down a semiblocked unlit side passage. Napier turns to Luisa, yelling over the metallic din, his face saying, *Do we trust her?*
Luisa's face replies, *Any better ideas?* They follow the woman between reams of fabric and wire, split boxes of teddy-bear eyes and assorted sewing-machine body shells and innards. The passage corners right and stops at an iron door. Day filters in through a grimy grille. The Mexican fumbles with her key ring. *It's 1875 down here,* thinks Luisa, *not 1975.* One key won't fit. The next fits but won't turn. Even thirty seconds on the factory floor has affected her hearing.
A war cry from six yards away: "Hands in the air!" Luisa spins around. "I said, *Hands in the fuckin air!"* Luisa's hands obey. The gunman keeps his pistol trained on Napier. "Turn around, Napier! *Slow!* Drop your gun!"
The señora shrills: "No shoot I! No shoot I, Señor! They force I show door! They say they kill —"
"Shuddup, you crazy fuckin' wetback! Scram! Outa my way!"
The woman creeps around him, pressing herself against the wall, shrieking, *"!No dispares! ! No dispares! !No quiero morir!"*
Napier shouts, through the funneled factory noise, "Easy now, Bisco, how much you being paid?"
Bisco hollers back, "Don't bother, Napier. Last words."
"I can't hear you! What did you say?"
"What—are—your—last—words?"
"Last words? Who are you? Dirty Harry?"
Bisco's mouth twitches. "I got a book of last words, and those were yours. You?" He looks at Luisa, keeping the gun trained on Napier.
A pistol shot punches a hole in the din, and Luisa's eyes clench shut. A hard thing touches her toe. She forces her eyes open. It is a handgun, skidded to a stop. Bisco's face is contorted into inexplicable agony. The señora's monkey wrench flashes and crumples the gunman's lower jaw. Ten or more blows of extreme ferocity follow, each one making Luisa flinch, punctuated by the words, *"Yo! Amaba! A! Eseljodido! Perro!"*
Luisa checks Joe Napier. He looks on, unhurt, thunderstruck.
The señora wipes her mouth and leans over the motionless, pulp-faced Bisco. "And *don't* call me 'wetback'!" She steps over his clotted head and unlocks the exit.
"You might want to tell the other two *I* did that to him," Napier says to her, retrieving Bisco's gun.
The señora addresses Luisa. *"Quítatelo de encima, cariño. Anda con gentuza y jDios míol ese viejo podría ser tu padre."*

65

Napier sits on the graffiti-frescoed subway train, watching Lester Rey's daughter. She is dazed, disheveled, shaky, and her clothes are still damp from the bank's sprinkler. "How did you find me?" she asks, finally.
"Big fat guy at your office. Nosboomer, or something."
"Nussbaum."
"That's it. Took a heap of persuading."

A silence lasts from Reunion Square subway to Seventeenth Avenue. Luisa picks at a hole in her jeans. "I guess you don't work at Seaboard any longer."
"I was put out to pasture yesterday"
"Fired?"
"No. Early retirement. Yes. I was put out to pasture."
"And you came back from the pasture this morning?"
"That's about the size of it."
The next silence lasts from Seventeenth Avenue to McKnight Park.
"I feel," Luisa hesitates, "that I—no, that *you*—broke some sort of decree back there. As if Buenas Yerbas had decided I was to die today. But here I am."
Napier considers this. "No. The city doesn't care. And you could say it was your father who just saved your life, when he kicked away that grenade rolling my way, thirty years ago." Their compartment groans and shudders. "We've got to go via a gun store. Empty guns make me nervous."
The subway emerges into the sunlight.
Luisa squints. "Where are we going?"
"To see somebody." Napier checks his watch. "She's flown in specially."
Luisa rubs her red eyes. "Can the somebody give us a copy of the Sixsmith Report? Because that dossier is my only way out."
"I don't know yet."

66

Megan Sixsmith sits on a low bench in the Buenas Yerbas Museum of Modern Art and stares back at a giant portrait of an old lady's ursine face, rendered in interlacing gray and black lines on a canvas otherwise blank. The only figurative in a room of Pollocks, de Koonings and Mirós, the portrait quietly startles. *"Look," she says,* thinks Megan, *"at your future. Your face, too, will one day be mine."* Time has knitted her skin into webs of wrinkles. Muscles sag here, tauten there, her eyelids droop. Her pearls are of inferior quality most likely, and her hair is mussed from an afternoon of rounding up grandchildren. *But she sees things I don't.*
A woman about her own age sits next to her. She could use a wash and a change of clothes.
"Megan Sixsmith?"
Megan glances sidelong. "Luisa Rey?"
She nods toward the portrait. "I've always liked her. My dad met her, the real lady, I mean. She was a Holocaust survivor who settled in BY. Ran a boardinghouse over in Little Lisbon. She was the artist's landlady."
Courage grows anywhere, thinks Megan Sixsmith, *like weeds.*
"Joe Napier said you flew in today from Honolulu."
"Is he here?"
"The guy behind me, in the denim shirt pretending to look at the Warhol. He's watching out for us. I'm afraid his paranoia is justified."
"Yes. I need to know you are who you say you are."
"I'm happy to hear it. Any ideas?"
"What was my uncle's favorite Hitchcock movie?"
The woman claiming to be Luisa Rey thinks for a while and smiles. "We talked about

Hitchcock in the elevator—I'm guessing he wrote you about that—but I don't remember him naming a favorite. He admired that wordless passage in *Vertigo,* where Jimmy Stewart trails the mysterious woman to the waterfront with the San Francisco backdrop. He enjoyed *Charade*—I know that's not Hitchcock, but it tickled him, you calling Audrey Hepburn a bubblehead."

Megan reclines into the seat. "Yes, my uncle referred to you in a card he wrote from the airport hotel. It was agitated, and worrying, and dotted with phrases like 'If anything should happen to me'—but it wasn't suicidal. Nothing could make Rufus do what the police claimed. I'm certain." *Ask her, and control your trembling, for God's sake*. "Miss Rey—do *you* think my uncle was murdered?"

Luisa Rey replies, "I'm afraid I know he was. I'm sorry."

The journalist's conviction is cathartic. Megan takes a deep breath. "I know about his work for Seaboard and the Defense Department. I never saw the whole report, but I checked its mathematics when I visited Rufus back in June. We vetted each other's work."

"The Defense Department? You don't mean Energy?"

"Defense. A by-product of the HYDRA-Zero reactor is weapons-grade uranium. Highest quality lots of it." Megan lets Luisa Rey digest the new implications. "What do you need?"

"The report, only the report, will bring Seaboard crashing down in public and legal arenas. And, incidentally, save my own skin."

Trust this stranger or get up and walk away?

A crocodile of schoolchildren clusters around the portrait of the old woman. Megan murmurs, under the curator's short speech, "Rufus kept academic papers, data, notes, early drafts, et cetera on *Starfish*—his yacht—for future reference. His funeral isn't until next week, probate won't begin until then, so this cache should still be untouched. I would bet a lot he had a copy of his report aboard. Seaboard's people may have already combed the boat, but he had a thing about not mentioning *Starfish* at work …"

"Where's *Starfish* moored now?"

67

CAPE YERBAS MARINA ROYALE

PROUD HOME OF THE *PROPHETESS*

BEST-PRESERVED SCHOONER IN THE WORLD!

Napier parks the rented Ford by the clubhouse, a weatherboarded former boathouse. Its bright windows boast an inviting bar, and nautical flags ruffle stiff in the evening wind. Sounds of laughter and dogs are carried from the dunes as Luisa and Napier cross the clubhouse garden and descend the steps to the sizable marina. A three-masted wooden ship is silhouetted against the dying east, towering over the sleek fiberglass yachts around it. Some people move on the jetties and yachts, but not many *"Starfish* is moored on the furthest jetty away from the clubhouse"—Luisa consults Megan Sixsmith's map—"past the *Prophetess."*

The nineteenth-century ship is indeed restored beautifully Despite their mission, Luisa is distracted by a strange gravity that makes her pause for a moment and look at its rigging, listen to its wooden bones creaking.

"What's wrong?" whispers Napier.

What is *wrong?* Luisa's birthmark throbs. She grasps for the ends of this elastic moment, but they disappear into the past and the future. "Nothing."

"It's okay to be spooked. I'm spooked myself."

"Yeah."

"We're almost there."

Starfish is where Megan's map says. They clamber aboard. Napier inserts a clip into the cabin door and slides a Popsicle stick into the gap. Luisa watches for watchers. "Bet you didn't learn that in the army."

"You lose your bet. Cat burglars make resourceful soldiers, and the draft board wasn't choosy …" A click. "Got it." The tidy cabin is devoid of books. An inset digital clock blinks from 21:55 to 21:56. Napier's flashlight's pencil beam rests on a navigation table fitted atop a mini–filing cabinet. "How about in there?"

Luisa opens a drawer. "This is it. Shine here." A mass of folders and binders. One, vanilla in color, catches her eye. *The HYDRAZero Reactor—An Operational Assessment Model—Project Head Dr. Rufus Sixsmith*. "Got it. This is it. Joe? You okay?"

"Yeah. It's just … about time something went well, so simply."

So Joe Napier can smile.

A motion in the cabin doorway; a man blocks out the stars. Napier reads Luisa's alarm and whirls around. In the flashlight Luisa sees a tendon in the gunman's wrist twitch, twice, but no gunfire sounds. *Jammed safety catch?*

Joe Napier makes a hiccuping sound, slumps to his knees, and cracks his head on the steel foot of the navigation table.

He lies inert.

Luisa loses all but the dimmest sense of being herself. Napier's flashlight rolls in the gentle swell, and its beam rotates to show his shredded torso. His lifeblood spreads obscenely quickly, obscenely scarlet, obscenely shiny Rigging whistles and twangs in the wind.

The killer closes the cabin door behind him. "Put the report on the table, Luisa." His voice is kindly "I don't want blood on it." She obeys. His face is hidden. "Well, you get to make peace with your maker."

Luisa grips the table. "You're Bill Smoke. You killed Sixsmith."

The darkness answers, "Bigger forces than me. I just dispatched the bullet."

Focus. "You followed us, from the bank, in the subway, to the art museum …"

"Does death always make you so verbose?"

Luisa's voice trembles. "What do you mean 'always'?"

68

Joe Napier drifts in a torrential silence.

The ghost of Bill Smoke hovers over his dark vision.

More than half of himself has gone already

Words come bruising the silence again. *He's going to kill her.*

That .38 in your pocket.

I've done my duty, I'm dying, for Chrissakes.

Hey. Go tell Lester Rey about duty and dying.

Napier's right hand inches to his buckle. He wonders if he is a baby in his cot or a man dying in his bed. Nights pass, no, lifetimes. Often Napier wants to ebb away, but his hand refuses to forget. The butt of a gun arrives in his palm. His finger enters a loop of steel, and a flare of clarity illuminates his purpose. *The trigger, this, yes. Pull her out. Slowly now …*

Angle the gun. Bill Smoke is just yards away

The trigger resists his index finger—then a blaze of incredible noise spins Bill Smoke backwards, his arms flailing like a marionette's.

In the fourth to last moment of his life, Napier fires another bullet into the marionette silhouetted by stars. The word *Silvaplana* comes to him, unasked for.

In the third to last moment, Bill Smoke's body slides down the cabin door.

Second to last, an inset digital clock blinks from 21:57 to 21:58.

Napier's eyes sink, newborn sunshine slants through ancient oaks and dances on a lost river.

Look, Joe, herons.

69

In Margo Roker's ward in Swannekke County Hospital, Hester Van Zandt glances at her watch. 21:57. Visiting hours end at ten o'clock. "One more for the road, Margo?" The visitor glances at her comatose friend, then leafs through her *Anthology of American Poetry*. "A little Emerson? Ah, yes. Remember this one? You introduced it to me.

If the red slayer thinks he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;

The vanish'd gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain—

"Margo? Margo? Margo!" Margo Roker's eyelids vibrate as if in REM. A groan squirms in her larynx. She gulps for air, then her eyes are wide open, blinking in confusion and alarm at the tubes in her nose. Hester Van Zandt is also panicky, but with hope. "Margo! Can you hear me? Margo!"

The patient's eyes settle on her old friend, and she lets her head sink into her pillow. "Yes, I can hear you, Hester, you're shouting in my goddamn ear."

70

Luisa Rey surveys the October 1 edition of the *Western Messenger* amid the steamy clatter of the Snow White Diner.

LLOYD HOOKS SKIPS $250,000 BAIL

PRESIDENT FORD VOWS TO "ROOT OUT CROOKS

WHO BRING IGNOMINY TO CORPORATE AMERICA"

A BYPD spokesman confirmed the newly appointed CEO of Seaboard Power Inc. and former Federal Power Commissioner Lloyd Hooks has fled the country forfeiting the quarter-million-dollar bail posted Monday. The latest twist to "Seaboardgate" comes a day after Hooks swore to "defend my integrity and the integrity of our great American company against this pack of nefarious lies." President Ford entered the fray at a White House press conference, condemning his former adviser and distancing himself from the Nixon appointee. "My administration makes no distinction between lawbreakers. We will root out the crooks who bring ignominy to corporate America and punish them with the utmost severity of the law." Lloyd Hooks's disappearance, interpreted by many observers as an admission of guilt, is the latest twist in a series of revelations triggered by a Sept. 4 incident at Cape Yerbas Marina Royale in which Joe Napier and Bill Smoke, security officers at Seaboard Inc.'s controversial Swannekke Island atomic power stations, shot each other. Eyewitness Luisa Rey, correspondent to this newspaper, summoned police to the crime scene, and the subsequent investigation has already spread to last month's killing of British atomic engineer and Seaboard consultant Dr. Rufus Sixsmith, the crash of former Seaboard CEO Alberto Grimaldi's Learjet over Pennsylvania two weeks ago, and an explosion in Third Bank of California in downtown B.Y which claimed the lives of two people. Five directors at Seaboard Power have been charged in connection with the conspiracy, and two have committed suicide. Three more, including Vice CEO William Wiley, have agreed to testify against Seaboard Corporation.
The arrest of Lloyd Hooks two days ago was seen as vindication of this newspaper's support for Luisa Rey's exposé of this major scandal, initially dismissed by William Wiley as "li-belous fantasy culled from a spy novel and wholly unworthy of a serious response." … *Cont. p. 2, Full Story p. 5, Comment p. 11.*

"Front page!" Bart pours Luisa's coffee. "Lester would be mighty proud."
"Hed say I'm just a journalist doing my job."
"Well, exactly, Luisa!"
Seaboardgate is no longer her scoop. Swannekke swarms with reporters, Senate investigators, FBI agents, county police, and Hollywood scriptwriters. Swannekke B is in mothballs; C is suspended.
Luisa gets Javier's postcard out again. It shows three UFOs zooming under the Golden Gate Bridge:

Hi Luisa, it's OK here but we live in a house so I can't jump across balconies when I visit my friends. Paul (that's Wolf-man but Mom says I can't call him that anymore though he kind of likes it when I do) is taking me to a stamp fare tom-morrow, then I can choose what paint I want for my bedroom and he cooks better than Mom. Saw you again on TV last night and in the papers. Don't forget me just because you're fameous now, OK? Javi

The other item of mail is an airmailed package from Megan Six-smith, sent in response to Luisa's request. It contains the final eight letters Robert Frobisher wrote to his friend Rufus Sixsmith. Luisa uses a plastic knife to slit the package open. She removes one of the yellowed

envelopes, postmarked October 10, 1931, holds it against her nose, and inhales. *Are molecules of Zedelghem Château, of Robert Fro-bisher's hand, dormant in this paper for forty-four years, now swirling in my lungs, in my blood?*
Who is to say?

LETTERS FROM ZEDELGHEM

ZEDELGHEM
10TH—X—1931

Sixsmith,
Ayrs in bed for three days, fogged with morphine, calling out in pain. V distracting and distressing. Dr. Egret warns J. and me not to confuse Ayrs's newfound joie de vivre in music with actual health and forbids VA. to work from his sickbed. Dr. Egret gives me the creeps. Never met a quack whom I didn't half-suspect of plotting to do me in as expensively as he could contrive.
Buried in music of my own. Cruel to say it, but when Hendrick arrives at breakfast and tells me, "Not today, Robert," I'm almost relieved. Spent last night working on a rumbling 'cello *allegro* lit by explosive triplets. Silence punctuated by breakneck mousetraps. Remember the church clock chiming three A.M. "I heard an owl," Huckleberry Finn says, "away off, who-whooing about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die." Always haunted me, that line. Next thing I know, Lucille was ballooning sheets of bright morning by the window. Morty Dhondt was downstairs, she told me, ready for our excursion. Thought I was dreaming, but no. My face was crusted over, and for a second I couldn't have told you my name. Grunted I didn't want to go anywhere with Morty Dhondt, I wanted sleep, I have work to do. "But last week you arranged to go motoring today!" objected Lucille.
I remembered. I washed, put on fresh clothes, and shaved. Sent Lucille to find the houseboy whod polished my shoes, etc. Down in the breakfast room, the amiable jewel merchant was smoking a cigar and reading *The Times*. "Don't hurry," he told me, when I apologized for my tardiness. "Where we're going no one will notice if we're early or late." Mrs. Willems brought me some kedgeree, and J. breezed in. She hadn't forgotten what day it was and gave me a bunch of white roses, tied with a black ribbon, and smiled, just like her old self.
Dhondt drives a claret 1927 Bugatti Royale Type 41, a real spanker, Sixsmith. Goes like a greased devil—nearly fifty on the metaled highway!—and boasts a Klaxon hooter that Dhondt fires off at the least provocation. Beautiful day for a grim journey The nearer to the Front one goes, naturally, the more blasted the countryside becomes. Beyond Roeselare, the land grows crater-scarred, crisscrossed with collapsing trenches and pocked with burnt patches where not even weeds take root. The few trees still standing here and there are, when you touch them,

lifeless charcoal. The skein of green on the land seems less nature revivified, more nature mildewed. Dhondt shouted over the engine's roar that farmers still daren't plow the land for fear of unexploded ordnance. One cannot pass by without thinking of the density of men in the ground. Any moment, the order to charge would be given, and infantrymen well up from the earth, brushing off the powdery soil. The thirteen years since Armistice seemed only as many hours.

Zonnebeke is a ramshackle village of semirepaired ruins and the site of a cemetery of the Eleventh Essex of the Fifty-third Brigade. The War Graves Commission told me this cemetery has the best chance of being where my brother was laid to rest. Adrian died in the charge of July 31 on Messines Ridge, right in the thick of it. Dhondt dropped me off at the gates and wished me luck. Tactfully, he told me he had business nearby—we must have been fifty miles from the nearest jeweler's—and left me to my quixotic quest. A consumptive ex-soldier guarded the gates when not tending his sorry vegetable plot. He also worked as a groundsman — self-appointed, one suspects—and waved a donation box at me, for "upkeep." Parted with a franc, and the fellow asked in tolerable English if I was looking for anyone in particular, as he had committed the entire cemetery to memory. Wrote down my brother's name, but he did that Gallic mouth droop that indicates, "My problems are mine, and yours are yours, and this one is yours."

Always felt I would divine which KNOWN UNTO GOD was Adrian's. A glowing inscription, a nodding magpie, or just a musical certainty would lead me to the right plot. Utter tripe, of course. The headstones were uncountable, uniform, and arrayed as if on parade. Coils of brambles invaded the perimeter. The air was stuffy as if the sky were sealing us in. Along the aisles and rows I searched the F's. Long odds, but one never knows. The War Office makes mistakes—if war's first victim is truth, its second is clerical efficiency. In the event, no Frobisher was resting in that plot of Flanders. The closest was "Froames, B. W, Private 2389 18th (Eastern Division)," so I laid J.'s white roses on his stone. Who is to say? Maybe Froames asked Adrian for a light one tired evening, or cowered with him as bombs rained down, or shared a Bovril. Am a sentimental fool and I know it.

One encounters buffoons like Orford in your college, who wear an air of deprivation that the war ended before they had a chance to show their mettle. Others, Figgis springs to mind, confess their relief not to have been of service age before 1918 but a certain shame that they feel this relief. I've often banged on to you about growing up in my legendary brother's shadow—every rebuke began with an "Adrian never used to …" or "If your brother were here now he'd …" Grew to hate the sound of his name. During the runup to my forcible ejection from the Frobishery it was all "You're a disgrace to Adrian's memory!" Never, ever forgive the parents that. Remembered our last send-off one drizzly autumn afternoon at Audley End, Adrian was in uniform, Pater clasping him. Days of bunting and cheering were long over—later heard Military Police were escorting conscripts to Dunkirk to deter mass desertions. All those Adrians jammed like pilchards in cemeteries throughout eastern France, western Belgium, beyond. We cut a pack of cards called historical context—our generation, Sixsmith, cut tens, jacks, and queens. Adrian's cut threes, fours, and fives. That's all.

Of course, "That's all" is never all. Adrian's letters were haunt-ingly aural. One can shut one's eyes but not one's ears. Crackle of lice in seams; scutter of rats; snap of bones against bullet; stutter of machine guns; thunder of distant explosions, lightning of nearer ones; ping of stones off tin helmets; flies buzzing over no-man's-land in summer. Later conversations add the scream of horses; cracking of frozen mud; buzz of aircraft; tanks, churning in mud holes; amputees, surfacing from the ether; belch of flamethrowers; squelch of bayonets in necks. European music is passionately savage, broken by long silences.

Do wonder if my brother liked boys as well as girls too, or if my vice is mine alone. Wonder if

he died celibate. Think of these troopers, lying together, cowering, alive; cold, dead. Tidied B. W Froames's headstone and went back to the gates. Well, my mission was bound to be futile. Groundsman was twiddling with twine, said nothing. Morty Dhondt collected me bang on time, and off we hurtled back toward civilization, ha. Passed through a place called Poelkapelle or some such, down an avenue of elms lasting mile after mile. Dhondt chose this straight to push the Bugatti as fast as she would go. Individual elms blurred into a single tree repeated to infinity like a spinning top. The needle was nudging top speed when a form like a running madwoman ran out smack in front of us—she hit the windscreen and spun over our heads. Heart popped like a gunshot, I can tell you! Dhondt braked, the road tilted us one way, shrugged us the other, the tires screamed and singed the air with hot rubber. We had run out of infinity My teeth had bitten deep into my tongue. If the brakes hadn't locked in such a way that the Bugatti continued its trajectory along the road, we would have finished our day—if not our lives—wrapped around an elm. The car scraped to a halt. Dhondt and I jumped out and ran back—to see a monster pheasant, flapping its broken wings. Dhondt blew out an elaborate oath in Sanskrit or something, and gave a *ha!* of relief that he hadn't killed some*one* that also expressed dismay at having killed *something*. Had lost the power of speech, and dabbed my bleeding tongue on my handkerchief. Proposed putting the poor bird out of its misery Dhondt's answer was a proverb whose idiocy may have been deliberate: "To those upon the menu, the sauce is no concern." He went back to try to coax the Bugatti back to life. Couldn't fathom his meaning but walked up to the pheasant, causing it to flap ever more desperately Its medallion breast feathers were matted with blood and fecal spewings. It cried, Sixsmith, just like a two-day-old baby Wished I had a gun. On the roadside was a stone as big as my fist. I smashed it down on the pheasant's head. Unpleasant—not the same as shooting a bird, not at all.

Wiped its blood off the best I could, using dock leaves plucked from the roadside. Dhondt had the car running, I hopped aboard, and we drove as far as the next village. A no-name place, as far as I could see, but it had a miserable café-cum-garage-cum–funeral parlor shared by a gang of silent locals and many flies who wheeled through the air like drugged angels of death. The hard braking had misaligned the Bugatti's front axle, so M.D. stopped here to have it seen to. We sat alfresco on the edge of a "square," in reality a pond of cobbly mud with a plinth plonked in its navel whose original inhabitant had long ago been melted down for bullets. Some dirty children chased the only fat hen in the country across the square— it flew up to the plinth. The children began throwing stones at it. Wondered where the bird's owner might be. I asked the barman who had formerly occupied the plinth. He didn't know, he was born in the south. My glass was dirty so I made the barman change it. He took umbrage and was less talkative from then on.

M.D. asked about my hour in the Zonnebeke cemetery. Didn't really answer. Mangled, bloodied pheasant kept flashing before my eyes. Asked M.D. where he'd spent his war. "Oh, you know, attending to business." In Bruges? I asked, surprised, hard put to imagine a Belgian diamond merchant prospering under the Kaiser's occupation. "Good God, no," answered M.D., "Johannesburg. My wife and I got out for the duration." I complimented his foresight. Modestly, he explained, "Wars do not combust without warning. They begin as little fires over the horizon. Wars approach. A wise man watches for the smoke, and prepares to vacate the neighborhood, just like Ayrs and Jocasta. My worry is that the next war will be so big, nowhere with a decent restaurant will be left untouched."

Was he so sure another war was coming?

"Another war is *always* coming, Robert. They are never properly extinguished. What sparks wars? The will to power, the backbone of human nature. The threat of violence, the fear of violence, or actual violence is the instrument of this dreadful will. You can see the will to

power in bedrooms, kitchens, factories, unions, and the borders of states. Listen to this and remember it. The nation-state is merely human nature inflated to monstrous proportions. QED, nations are entities whose laws are written by violence. Thus it ever was, so ever shall it be. War, Robert, is one of humanity's two eternal companions."

So, I asked, what was the other?

"Diamonds." A butcher in a bloodstained apron ran across the square, and the children scattered. Now he had the problem of luring the hen down from its plinth.

The League of Nations? Surely nations knew laws other than warfare? What of diplomacy?

"Oh, diplomacy," said M.D., in his element, "it mops up war's spillages; legitimizes its outcomes; gives the strong state the means to impose its will on a weaker one, while saving its fleets and battalions for weightier opponents. Only professional diplomats, inveterate idiots, and women view diplomacy as a long-term substitute for war."

The reductio ad absurdum of M.D.'s view, I argued, was that science devises ever bloodier means of war until humanity's powers of destruction overcome our powers of creation and our civilization drives itself to extinction. M.D. embraced my objection with mordant glee.

"Precisely. Our will to power, our science, and those v. faculties that elevated us from apes, to savages, to modern man, are the same faculties that'll snuff out *Homo sapiens* before this century is out! You'll probably live to see it happen, you fortunate son. What a symphonic crescendo *that'll* be, eh?"

The butcher came over to ask the barman for a ladder. Got to end here. Can't keep my eyes open any longer.

Sincerely,

R.F.

***

zedelghem

21ST—X—1931

Sixsmith,

Ayrs should be up on his feet tomorrow after a bed-bound fortnight. Wouldn't wish syphilis on my worst enemies. Only one or two, anyway. The syphilitic decays in increments, like fruit rotting in orchard verges. Dr. Egret calls by every other day, but there's not much left to prescribe except ever-bigger doses of morphine. VA. loathes using it because it clouds his music.

J. prone to bouts of despondency. Some nights, she just clings to me as if I'm her life belt and she's drowning. Feel sorry for the woman, but I'm interested in her body, not her problems. Was.

Spent the fortnight gone in the music room, reworking my year's fragments into a "sextet for

overlapping soloists": piano, clarinet, 'cello, flute, oboe, and violin, each in its own language of key, scale, and color. In the first set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the second, each interruption is recontinued, in order. Revolutionary or gimmicky? Shan't know until it's finished, and by then it'll be too late, but it's the first thing I think of when I wake, and the last thing I think of before I fall asleep, even if J. is in my bed. She should understand, the artist lives in two worlds.

Next day

Had the devil of a spat with VA. He dictated a toccata-like étude during this morning's compositional, it seemed deuced familiar, then I recognized the refrain from my own "Angel of Mons"! If Ayrs hoped I'd not notice he was v. much mistaken. I told him straight—this was my music. He changed his tune: "What d'you mean, *your* music? Frobisher, when you grow up, you'll find that all composers draw inspiration from their environments. You're one of many elements in mine, receiving a fair salary, I might add, enjoying daily master classes in composition and mingling with the greatest musical minds of the age. If you're unhappy with these terms, Hendrick will drive you to the station." Well, a v. different man from the one I'd wheeled down to the lodge house a few weeks ago, when he'd pleaded with me to stay on until next spring. I asked whom he had in mind to replace me. Mrs. Willems? The gardener? Eva? Nefertiti? "Oh, I'm sure Sir Trevor Mackerras could lay his hands on a suitable boy for me. Yes, I shall advertise. You're not as singular as you like to think. Now. Do you want your job or not?"

Couldn't find a way to win back lost ground so I walked out, complaining of agony in my big toe. VA. fired this warning at my flank: "If your toe isn't better by the morning, Frobisher, get it fixed in London and don't come back." Sometimes I want to build a bloody great bonfire and toss the old sod into its roaring heart.

Some days later

Still here, J. visited later, spun me a line about Ayrs's pride, how much he values my work, artistic tempers etc., but please stay, for her sake if not for his. Accepted this proxy fig leaf cum olive branch, and our lovemaking that night was almost affectionate. Winter coming on, and I'm not up to adventuring around Europe on my modest nest egg. Would need to meet a stupid, wealthy heiress rather smartish if I left now. Anyone spring to mind? Will send another package for Jansch, to boost my emergency fund. If Ayrs won't cut me in for my ideas that went into "Todtenvogel"— enjoying its twentieth public outing since Warsaw—I'll just have to reimburse myself. Resolve to be much more cautious before showing VA. my own compositions again. You know, having the roof over one's head dependent upon the good offices of an employer is a *loathsome* way to live. Christ only knows how the serving classes stand it. Are the Frobishery domestics forever biting *their* tongues as I must? one wonders. Eva back from her summer in Switzerland. Well, this young woman *says* she's Eva, and the resemblance is certainly striking, but that snotty duckling who left Zedelghem three months ago has returned a most graceful swan. She supports her mother, bathes her father's eyelids with cotton wool dipped in cold water and reads him Flaubert for hours on end, she's courteous to the servants, and she even asks me about my sextet's progress. Was sure it was some new strategy to oust me, but seven days on I'm beginning to suspect E. the stinker just might be

dead and buried. V. well, there *is* more to E.'s & my pax than meets the eye, but must first provide some background. Since my arrival in Neerbeke, Eva's "landlady" in Bruges, Mme. van de Velde, had been on at both E. & J. for me to visit their house so her five daughters—E.'s schoolfellows—can practice their English on a genuine English gentleman. M. van de Velde, you'll remember, is the alleged rake of Minnewa-ter Park who turned out to be a manufacturer of munitions and respected civic pillar etc. Mme. van de Velde is one of those tiresome, persistent women whose ambitions won't be thwarted by "He's v. busy at the moment." Actually, one suspects J. of fixing the fait accompli out of spite—as her daughter grows swanlike, the mother is turning into a nasty old rook.

Today was the day appointed for me to dine at the van d. Vs— five evenly spaced daughters plus Mater and Pater. Needed a new set of strings for the 'cello, and it does Ayrs no harm to see how helpless he is without me, so I put on my brave face and hoped the v.d.Vs employ a chef commensurate to a factory owner's income. So at eleven o'clock the van de Velde car—a silver Mercedes-Benz, thank you very much—arrived at Zedelghem, and their driver, a perspiring snowman with no neck and no French, drove E. and me back to Bruges. In the past we would have ridden in stony silence, but found myself telling E. a little about my Cambridge days. E. warned me that the eldest van de Velde, Marie-Louise, had decided to marry an Englishman at any cost, so I should have to guard my chastity with the utmost care.

How do you like *that?*

At the van de Veldes' town house, the girls were arranged on the stairway to greet me in ascending order of age—half-expected 'em to burst into song, and stone the crows, Sixsmith, that's what they did. "Greensleeves," in English. Syrupy as humbugs. Then Mme. vd.V pinched my cheek as if I were a homecoming runaway and said, owlishly "How do you *do-ooo?"* Was ushered into "the salon"—a nursery—and seated on "the question chair," a toy box. The vd.V daughters, a hydra of heads named Marie-Louise, Stephanie, Zenobe, Alphonsine, and I forget the last, ranged from nine years of age to said Marie-Louise, one year Eva's senior. All girls possess a thoroughly unjustified self-confidence. A v. long sofa sagged beneath this family of porkers. The maid brought lemonade while Mme. began the questions. "Eva tells us your family are v. well connected in Cambridge, Mr. Frobisher?" Glanced Eva-wards; she pulled a mock-fascinated face. Hid my smile and admitted my family are in the Domesday Book and that Pater is an eminent churchman. All attempts to turn the topic away from my eligibility were yorkered, and after a quarter of an hour the bug-eyed Marie-Louise had sensed her mater's approval and settled I would be her Prince Charming. She asked this: "Mr. Frobisher, are you well acquainted with Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street?" Well, thought I, the day might not be a complete wreck. A girl with a taste for irony must conceal some depths. But Marie-Louise was serious! A congenital dunce. No, I replied, I didn't know Mr. Holmes personally, but he and David Copperfield could be seen playing billiards at my club every Wednesday. Luncheon was served on fine Dresden crocks in a dining room with a large reproduction of *The Last Supper* over floral wallpaper. Food a disappointment. Dry trout, greens steamed to a sludge, gâteau simply vulgar; thought I was back dining in London. The girls tittered *glissando* at my trivial missteps in French—yet their frightful English rasps on one's ear unbearably Mme. v.d.V, who also summered in Switzerland, gave laborious accounts of how Marie-Louise had been eulogized in Berne as "the Flower of the Alps" by Countess Slãck-Jawski or the Duchess of Sümdümpstädt. Couldn't even force out a civil "Comme c'est char-mant!" M. v.d.V arrived from his office. Asked a hundred questions on cricket to amuse his daughters with this quaint English ritual of "Ins that are Out" and "Outs that are In." A pi-jawed ass of kingly proportions, so busy planning his next boorish interruption that he never listens properly. Pays himself unveiled compliments, beginning "Call me old-fashioned but …" or "Some consider me a snob but …" Eva sent me a wry look. It said, "And to think you

honestly thought *this* oaf was a threat to my reputation!"
After luncheon, the sun came out, and Mme. v.d.V announced we would all go for a walk to show the honored visitor the sights of Bruges. Tried to say I'd already impinged on their hospitality enough, but wasn't to get away so lightly The Great Patriarch excused himself—had a pile of chits to sign as high as the Matterhorn. May he die in an avalanche. After the maids had hatted and gloved the girls, the carriage was summoned and I was carted around one church after another. As dear old Kilvert notes, nothing is more tiresome than being told what to admire, and having things pointed at with a stick. Can scarcely recall the name of a single sight. By the itinerary's finale, the great clock tower, my jaw was hurting from all the yawns I'd suppressed. Mme. van de Velde gave the pinnacle one squint and announced that she would let us young things scramble up there by ourselves and wait in the patisserie across the piazza. Marie-Louise, who outweighs her mother, remarked that it wouldn't be ladylike to allow Maman to wait alone. Brainbox couldn't go because of her asthma, and if Brainbox wasn't going etc. & etc., until in the end only Eva and I bought tickets to go up. I paid, to show I wasn't blaming her personally for the hideous waste of a day. Went first. The stairway was an evernarrower spiral. A rope ran at hand height through iron rings set into the wall. Feet had to feel their own way. Only source of light was occasional narrow windows. Only sounds were our feet and E.'s feminine breathing, reminding me of my nocturnes with her mother. The van de Veldes are six never-ending, ill-tuned harpsichord *allegretti,* and my ears rang with gratitude to be free of 'em. Had forgotten to count the steps, I thought aloud. My voice sounded locked in a closet of blankets. Eva gave me a lazy *"Oui …"*
Emerged into an airy chamber housing the cartwheel-size cogs of the clock mechanism. Ropes and cables disappeared into the ceiling. A dogsbody snoozed in his deck chair. He was supposed to inspect our tickets—on the Continent one must forever be producing a ticket—but we slipped by him up a final flight of wooden stairs to the viewing belvedere. Tricolor Bruges spread out, far below: roof-tile orange; masonry gray; canal brown. Horses, automobiles, cyclists, a crocodile of choirboys, witch-hat roofs, washing on lines across side streets. Looked for Ostend, found it. Sunlit strip of North Sea turned Polynesian ultramarine. Seagulls wheeled in currents, I got giddy following 'em and thought of Ewing's mol-lyhawk. Eva declared she had spotted the van de Veldes. Assumed this was a comment on their ampleness but looked where she said and, sure enough, six little blobs in pastels around a café table. E. folded her ticket into a paper dart and flung it over the parapet. Wind carried it off until the sun burned it up. What would she do if Dogsbody woke and demanded her ticket? "I'll cry and say the horrible English boy stole it." So I folded my ticket into a paper dart, too, told E. she had no evidence, and launched it. Instead of soaring high, my dart fell out of sight in a moment. E.'s character depends on which angle you're looking from, a quality of superior opals. "You know, I can't remember seeing Papa so content and alive as he is now," she said.
The awful v.d.Vs had created a camaraderie. Asked her straight what had happened in Switzerland. Had she fallen in love, worked in an orphanage, had a mystical encounter in a snowy grotto?
She began to say something several times. In the end, she said (blushing!), "I was missing a certain young man I met this June."
You're surprised? Imagine *my* feelings! Yet I was every inch the gentleman you know me for. Instead of flirting back, I said, "And your first impression of this young man? Was it not wholly negative?"
"Partly negative." I observed her beads of perspiration from the climb, her lips, and the fine, fine hairs on her upper lip.
"He's a tall, dark, handsome, musical foreigner?"
She snorted. "He *is* … tall, yes; dark, quite; handsome, not so much as he thinks, but let us say

he can catch the eye; musical, prodigiously; a foreigner, to his core. Remarkable that you know so much about him! Are you spying on him too, as he passes through Minnewater Park?" I had to laugh. So did she. "Robert, I sense …" She gazed at me shyly "You're experienced. May I call you Robert, by the way?"

I said it was about time she did.

"My words are not … entirely appropriate. Are you angry?"

No, I said, no. Surprised, flattered, but angry, not at all.

"I behaved so spitefully to you. But I'm hoping we can start again."

Answered, of course, I'd like that too. "Since my childhood," E. said, looking away, "I've thought of this balcony as my own belvedere, from *A Thousand and One Nights*. I often come up here at this hour, after school. I'm the empress of Bruges, you see. Its citizens are my subjects. The van de Veldes are my jesters. I shall chop off their heads." A beguiling creature, she really is. My blood was hot, and I was seized by an impulse to give the empress of Bruges a lingering kiss.

Got no further; a party of infernal American tourists swarmed up through the narrow doorway. Fool that I am, I pretended not to be with Eva. Took in view from other side, trying to wind in all unraveled strings of myself. When Dogsbody announced that the viewing balcony was closing shortly, Eva was no longer there, like a cat. How true to form. Once again forgot to count the steps going down.

At the cake shop Eva was helping littlest v.d.V at pussy's cradle. Mme. van de Velde fanned herself with a menu and ate *boule de I'Yser* with Marie-Louise as they dissected the fashions of passersby Eva avoided my eye. Spell was broken. Marie-Louise sought my eye, the spoony-eyed little heifer. Ambled back to the v.d.Vs' house where, hallelujah, Hendrick was waiting with the Cowley Eva bade me *au revoir* in the doorway—glanced back to see her smile. Bliss! The evening was golden and warm. All the way to Neerbeke, saw Eva's face, strand or two of hair across her face, left there by the wind. Don't be hatefully jealous, Sixsmith. You know how it is.

J. senses the entente between Eva and me, and doesn't like it one fig. Last night, I imagined E. was under me rather than her mother. Crescendo followed only bars later, a whole movement before J. Can women detect imaginary betrayals? I ask because, with stupendous intuition, she gave me this subtle warning: "I want you to know something, Robert. If you ever touch Eva, I'll find out, and I'll destroy you."

"I shouldn't think of it," I lied.

"I shouldn't even dream of it, if I were you," she warned.

Couldn't leave it like that. "Why in hell do you think I'm attracted to your gangly, unpleasant daughter, anyway?" She did the v. same snort Eva had done up on her belvedere.

Sincerely,
R.F.

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ZEDELGHEM

24.TH—**X**—1931

Sixsmith,

Where the blazes is your reply? Look here, I'm much obliged to you, but if you think I'll wait around for your letters to appear, I'm afraid you're sorely mistaken. It is all perfectly hateful, hateful as my hypocrite father. I could ruin him. He's ruined me. Anticipating the end of the world is humanity's oldest pastime. Dhondt is right, damn his Belgian eyes, damn all Belgian eyes. Adrian would still be alive if "plucky little Belgium" never existed. Someone should turn this dwarf-country into a giant boating lake and toss in Belgium's inventor, his feet tied to a Minerva. If he floats, he's guilty To sink a white-hot poker through my father's damn eyes! Name one. Go on, name me just *one* famous Belgian. He has more money than Rothschild, but will he pay me another farthing? Miserable, so miserable. How Christian is it to cut me off without a single shilling to my name? Drowning is too good for him. Dhondt is right, I'm afraid. Wars are never cured, they just go into remission for a few years. The End is what we want, so I'm afraid the End is what we're damn well going to get. There. Set that to music. Timpani, cymbals, and a million trumpets, *if*" you would be so kind. Paying the old bastard with my own music. Kills me.

Sincerely,
R.F.

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ZEDELGHEM

29TH—**X**—1931

Sixsmith,

Eva. Because her name is a synonym for temptation: what treads nearer to the core of man? Because her soul swims in her eyes. Because I dream of creeping through the velvet folds to her room, where I let myself in, hum her a tune so—so—*so* softly, she stands with her naked feet on mine, her ear to my heart, and we waltz like string puppets. After that kiss, she says, "Vous embrassez comme un poisson rouge!" and in moonlit mirrors we fall in love with our youth and beauty Because all my life, sophisticated, idiotic women have taken it upon themselves to *understand* me, to *cure* me, but Eva knows I'm terra incognita and explores me unhurriedly, like you did. Because she's lean as a boy Because her scent is almonds, meadow grass. Because if I smile at her ambition to be an Egyptologist, she kicks my shin under the table. Because she makes me think about something other than myself. Because even when serious she shines. Because she prefers travelogues to Sir Walter Scott, prefers Billy Mayerl to Mozart, and couldn't tell C major from a sergeant major. Because *I,* only I, see her smile a fraction before it reaches her face. Because Emperor Robert is not a good man—his best part is commandeered by his unperformed music— but she gives me that rarest smile, anyway. Because we listened to nightjars. Because her laughter spurts through a blowhole in the top of

her head and sprays all over the morning. Because a man like me has no business with this substance “beauty” yet here she is, in these soundproofed chambers of my heart.

Sincerely,
R.F.

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LE ROYAL HôTEL, BRUGES
6TH—XI—1931

Sixsmith,
Divorces. V messy affairs but Ayrs’s and mine was over in a single day. Just yesterday morning we were at work on the second movement of his ambitious swan song. He announced a new approach for our Compositional. “Frobisher, today I’d like you to come up with some themes for my Severo movement. Something eve-of-war-ish in E minor. Once you’ve got something that catches my eye, I’ll take it over and develop its potential. Got that?”
Got that I had. Like it I didn’t, not one bit. Scientific papers are coauthored, yes, and a composer might work with a virtuoso musician to explore the boundaries of the playable—like Elgar and W. H. Reed—but a coauthored symphonic work? V dubious idea, and told VA. so in no uncertain terms. He tsked. “I didn’t say ‘coauthored,’ boy. You gather the raw material, I refine it as I see fit.” This hardly reassured me. He chided me: “All the Greats have their apprentices do it. How else could a man like Bach churn out new masses every week?”
We were in the twentieth century when I last looked, I retorted. Audiences pay to hear the composer whose name is on the program notes. They don’t pay money for Vyvyan Ayrs only to get Robert Frobisher. VA. got agitated. “They won’t ‘get’ you! They’ll get me! You’re not listening, Frobisher. You do the block-and-tackle work, I orchestrate, I arrange, I polish.”
“Block-and-tackle” work like my “Angel of Mons,” robbed at gunpoint for the Adagio in Ayrs’s glorious final monument? One may dress plagiarism up however one wishes, it’s still plagiarism. “Plagiarism?” Ayrs kept his voice low, but his knuckles on his cane were whitening. “In bygone days—when you were grateful for my tutelage—you called me one of the greatest living European composers. Which is to say, the world. Why would such an artist possibly need to ‘plagiarize’ anything from a copyist who, may I remind him, was unable to obtain even a bachelor’s degree for himself from a college for the terminally privileged? You’re not hungry enough, boy, that’s your problem. You’re Mendelssohn aping Mozart.”
The stakes rose like inflation in Germany, but I am constitutionally unable to fold under pressure:—I dig in. “I’ll tell you why you need to plagiarize! Musical sterility!” The finest moments in “Todtenvogel” are mine, I told him. The contrapuntal ingenuities of the new work’s Allegro non troppo are mine. I hadn’t come to Belgium to be his damn fag.
The old dragon breathed smoke. Ten bars of silence in 6/8. Stubbed out his cigarette. “Your petulance doesn’t deserve serious attention. In fact it deserves dismissal, but that would be acting in the heat of the moment. Instead, I want you to think. Think about reputation.” Ayrs unrolled the word. “Reputation is everything. Mine, save for a youthful exuberance that earned

me the clap, is beyond reproach. Yours, my disinherited, gambling, bankrupt friend, is expired. Leave Zedelghem whenever you wish. But be warned. Leave without my consent and all musical society west of the Urals, east of Lisbon, north of Naples, and south of Helsinki will know a scoundrel named Robert Frobisher forced himself upon purblind Vyvyan Ayrs's wife, his beloved wife, yes, the enchanting Mevrouw Crommelynck. She will not deny it. Imagine the scandal! After everything Ayrs had done for Frobisher, too … well, no wealthy patron, no impoverished patron, no festival organizer, no board of governors, no parent whose Little Lucy Lamb wants to learn the piano will have anything, anything to do with you."

So VA. knows. For weeks, months, probably. Was badly wrong-footed. Highlighted my impotence by calling Ayrs some v. rude names. "Oh, flattery!" he crowed. "Encore, Maestro!" Stopped myself battering the pox-nibbled corpse to a premature death with the bassoon. Didn't stop myself hissing that if Ayrs was half as good a husband as he was a manipulator and a larcenist of better men's ideas, his wife might not put it about so much. Come to think of it, I added, how much credibility would his campaign to smear my name carry when European society learned what kind of woman Jocasta Crommelynck was in her private life?

Hadn't even scratched him. "You ignorant ass, Frobisher. Jo-casta's numerous affairs are discreet, always have been. Any society's upper crust is riddled with immorality how else d'you think they keep their power? Reputation is king of the public sphere, not private. It is dethroned by public acts. Disinheritance. Fleeing famous hotels. Defaulting on monies owed to the gentry's lenders of last resort. Jocasta had my blessing when she seduced you, you stuck-up piffler. I required you to finish 'Todtenvogel.' You fancy yourself a larky buck, but there's alchemy between Jocasta and I you cannot begin to fathom. She'll fall out of love with you the moment you threaten us. You'll see. Now go away and come back tomorrow with your homework done. We will pretend your little tantrum never happened."

Was only too pleased to comply Needed to think.

J. must have played a major part in investigating my recent history. Hendrick doesn't speak English, and VA. couldn't have done this delving alone. She must like louche men—explains why she married Ayrs. Where E. stands on all of this I couldn't guess, because yesterday was Wednesday, so she was at school in Bruges. Eva could not know about my affair with her mother and still make such open signs of love to me. Surely?

Spent afternoon walking across the bleak fields in solitary rage. Sheltered from hailstones in a bombed-out chapel's lych-gate. Thought about E., thought about E., thought about E. Only two things were clear:—hanging myself from Zedelghem's flagpole was preferable to letting its parasite master plunder my talents a day longer; and never seeing E. again was unthinkable. "It'll all end in tears, Frobisher!" Yes, possibly, elopements often do, but I love her, I actually love her, and there it is.

Returned to the château just before it got dark, ate cold meats in Mrs. Willems's kitchen. Learnt that J. and her Circean caresses were in Brussels on estate business and would not be back that night. Hendrick told me VA. had retired early with his wireless and instructions not to be disturbed. Perfect. Took a long soak in the tub and a wrote a well-knotted set of scalic bass lines. Crises send me scurrying into music, where nothing can harm me. Retired early myself, locked my door, and packed my valise. Woke myself this morning at four o'clock. Freezing fog outside. Wanted to pay VA. a final call. Barefoot except for socks, I crept along the wintry corridors to Ayrs's door. Shivering, eased it open, at pains to avoid the slightest noise—Hendrick sleeps in an adjoining room. Lights off, but in the ember glow from the hearth I saw Ayrs, stretched out like that mummy in the British Museum. His room stank of bitter medicine. Crept to the cabinet by his bed. Drawer was stiff, and as I jerked it open an ether bottle on top wobbled—just caught it. VA.'s flaunted Luger lay bundled in its chamois cloth wrapped in a string vest, next to a little saucer of bullets. They rattled. Ayrs's fragile skull was only inches

away, but he didn't wake. His breathing was wheezy as a ratty old barrel organ. Felt an impulse to steal a clutch of bullets, so I did.

A blue vein throbbed over Ayrs's Adam's apple, and I fought off an unaccountably strong urge to open it up with my penknife. Most uncanny Not quite déjà vu, more jamais vu. Killing, an experience that comes to few outside wartime. What is the timbre of murder? Don't worry, I'm not writing you a confession of homicide. Working on my sextet while evading a manhunt would be far too much trouble, and ending one's career swinging in soiled underwear is hardly dignified. Even worse, murdering Eva's father in cold blood might put the kibosh on her feelings for me. VA. slumbered on, oblivious to all this, and I pocketed his pistol. I'd stolen the bullets, so taking the Luger too had a sort of logic. Curiously heavy things, guns. It emanated a bass note against my thigh: it's killed people, for sure; this little Luger went to market. Why did I take it, exactly? Couldn't tell you. But place its mouth against your ear and you hear the world in a different way.

Last port of call was Eva's empty room. Lay on her bed, stroked her clothes, you know how I get sentimental over partings. Left the shortest letter of my life on her dressing table: "Empress of Bruges. Your belvedere, your hour." Back to my room. Bade my four-poster bed a fond farewell, raised the stubborn sash window, and effected my flight over the icy roof. *Flight* was nearly the word—a tile slid out and crashed down to the gravel walk below. Lay prone, expecting shouts and alarums at any second, but no one had heard. Reached Earth courtesy of the obliging yew tree and made my way through the frosty herb garden, keeping the topiary between me and the servants' rooms. Rounded the front of the house and walked down the Monk's Walk. East wind straight from the steppes, was glad of Ayrs's sheepskin. Heard arthritic poplars, nightjars in the fossilized woods, a crazed dog, feet on frozen gravel, rising pulse in my temples, some sorrow too, for myself, for the year. Passed the old lodge, took the Bruges road. Had hoped to hitch a lift on a milk truck or cart, but there was nothing about. Stars were fading in the frosty predawn. A few cottage candles were lit, glimpsed a fiery face in the smithy, but the road north was nobody's but mine.

So I thought, but the noise of an automobile was following me. Wasn't going to hide, so I stopped and faced it. Headlamps dazzled, the car slowed, the engine stalled, and a familiar voice shrieked at me: "And where might you be creeping off to at such an ungodly hour?"

Mrs. Dhondt, none other, wrapped up in a black sealskin coat. Had the Ayrses sent her out to capture the runaway slave? Confusedly, I garbled out, like an utter ass, "Oh, there's been an accident!"

Cursed myself for this cul-de-sac of a lie, for clearly I was fit as a fiddle, alone, on foot, and with my valise and satchel. "What terrible luck!" responded Mrs. Dhondt, with martial gusto, filling in my blanks for me. "Friend or family?"

I saw my lifeboat. "Friend."

"Morty did warn Mr. Ayrs against buying a Cowley for precisely this reason, you know! Unreliable in a crisis. Silly Jocasta, why didn't she telephone me? Jump in, then! One of my Arabian mares gave birth to two glorious foals just an hour ago, and all three are doing splendidly! I was on my way home, but I'm far too excited to sleep, so I'll drive you to Ostend if you miss the connection at Bruges. I do so love the roads at this hour. So what is the nature of the accident? Buck up, now, Robert. Never assume the worst until you have all the facts to hand."

Reached Bruges by dawn by virtue of a few plain untruths. Selected this superior hotel across from St. Wenceslas because its exterior looks like a bookend and its flower boxes are well planted with miniature firs. My rooms overlook a quiet canal on the west side. Now I've finished this letter, will take forty winks until it's time to go to the belfry. E. might be there. If not, will lurk in an alleyway near her school and waylay her. If she fails to appear there, a call

at the van de Veldes' may be necessary. If my name is fouled, shall disguise myself as a chimney sweep. If I am rumbled, a long letter. If long letter is intercepted, another one is waiting in her dressing table. I am a determined man.

Sincerely,
R.F

P.S.—Thanks for your anxious letter, but why the clucking Mother Goose? Yes, of *course* I'm fine—apart from the consequences of described contretemps with VA. Am more than fine, to tell the truth. My mind is capable of any creative task it can conceive. Composing the best work of my life, of all lives. Have money in my pocket-book and more in the First Bank of Belgium. Reminds me. If Otto Jansch won't budge from thirty guineas for the Munthe pair, tell him to skin his mother and roll her in salt. See what the Russian on Greek Street'll cough up.

P.P.S.—One last serendipitous discovery. Back at Zedelghem, whilst packing my valise, checked nothing had rolled under the bed. Found half a ripped-in-two volume wedged under one of the legs by a long-since-departed guest to stop the bed wobbling. Prussian officer, maybe, or Debussy, who knows? Thought nothing of it until a minute later, when the title on the spine registered. Grimy job, but I lifted the bed up and extracted the bound pages. Sure enough:—"The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing." From the interrupted page to the end of the first volume. Would you believe it? Slipped the half-book into my valise. Will finish gobbling it down v. soon. Happy, dying Ewing, who never saw the unspeakable forms waiting around history's corner.

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LE ROYAL Hôtel, bruge
near the endth—xi—1931

Sixsmith,
Working nights on *Cloud Atlas Sextet* until I drop, quite literally, no other way to get off to sleep. My head is a Roman candle of invention. Lifetime's music, arriving all at once. Boundaries between noise and sound are conventions, I see now. All boundaries are conventions, national ones too. One may transcend any convention, if only one can first conceive of doing so. Take this island, midstream between timbre and rhythm, not down in any book of theory but it's here! Hear the instruments in my head, perfect clarity anything I wish for. When it's finished, there'll be nothing left in me, I know, but this king's shilling in my sweaty palm is the philosopher's stone! A man like Ayrs spends his allotted portion in dribs and drabs over a dragged-out lifetime. Not I. Heard nothing from VA. or that adulterous, rubbery, melodramatic wife of his. Suppose they believe I ran home to England. Last night dreamt I fell from the Imperial Western, clutching my drainpipe. Violin note, misplayed, hideously—that's my sextet's final note.

Am perfectly well. So damnably well! Wish I could make you see this brightness. Prophets went blind if they saw Jehovah. Not deaf, but blind, you appreciate the significance. Could still hear him. Talk to myself all day long. Did it absently at first, the human voice soothes me so, but now it takes real effort to stop, so I let it run and run. Take walks when not composing. Could write a Michelin guide to Bruges now, had I but space enough, and time. Round the poorer quarters, not just the groves of the wealthy. Behind a grubby window a grandmother was arranging Saintpaulia in a bowl. Tapped on the pane and asked her to fall in love with me. Pursed her lips, don't think she spoke French, but I tried again. Cannonball-headed fellow with absolutely no chin appeared at the window, spat out brimstone curses on me and my house. Eva. Every day I've climbed up the belfry chanting a lucky chant at one syllable per beat, "To—day—to—day—let—her—be— here—to—day—to—day." Not yet, though I wait until it's dark. Golden days, bronze days, iron days, watery days, foggy days. Turkish delight sunsets. Nights drawing in, frosty nip in the air. Eva is guarded in a schoolroom down on Earth, chewing her pencil, dreaming of being with me, I know it, me, looking down from amongst exfoliating apostles, dreaming of being with her. Her damn parents must have found the note in her dressing table. Wish I'd gone about things more cunningly. Wish I'd shot the damn fraudster when I had the chance. Ayrs'll never find a replacement for Frobisher—*Eternal Recurrence'll* die with him. Those van de Veldes must have intercepted my second letter to Eva in Bruges. Tried to bluff my way into her school but got chased out by a pair of liveried pigs with whistles and sticks. Followed E. back from school, but the curtains of day are undrawn so briefly cold and darkling when she leaves her school, cowled in her brown cape, orbited by v.d.Vs, chaperones, and classmates. Peered out between my cap and muffler, waiting for her heart to sense me. Not funny Today I brushed Eva's cape as I passed in drizzle, in crowd. E. didn't notice me. As I near her a tonic pedal rises in volume, from groin, resounding in my chest cavity up to somewhere behind my eyes. Why so nervous? Tomorrow maybe, yes, tomorrow, for certain. Nothing to be afraid of. She has told me she loves me. Soon, soon.

Sincerely,
R.F.

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LE ROYAL HÔTEL

25TH—**xi**—1931

Sixsmith,

Streaming nose and bad cough since Sunday. Matches my cuts and bruises. Hardly stepped outside, nor do I wish to. Freezing fog crawls out of the canals, it stifles one's lungs and chills one's veins. Send me an india-rubber hot-water bottle, would you? Only earthenware ones here.

Hotel manager dropped by earlier. An earnest penguin with no bottom at all. One presumes it is his patent-leather shoes that squeak so as he walks, but one never knows in the Low Countries.

His real reason for calling was to ensure I am a wealthy student of architecture, not some dubious Cad the Lad who'll skip town without settling his account. Anyway, promised to show the color of my money at Reception tomorrow, so a bank visit is unavoidable. This cheered the fellow up, and he hoped my studies were proceeding well. Excellently, I assured him. I don't say I'm a composer because I can no longer face the Moronic Inquisition: "What kind of music do you write?" "Oh, should I have heard of you?" "Where do you get your ideas from?"

Not in the mood for letter writing after all, not after my recent encounter with E. Lamplighter is making his rounds. If I could turn back the clock, Sixsmith. Would that I could.

Next day

Improved. Eva. Ah. I'd laugh, if it didn't hurt quite so much. Can't remember where I was when last I wrote to you. Time is an alle-grissimo blur since my Night of Epiphany. Well, it had become pretty clear I wasn't going to be able to catch E. on her own. She never appeared at the belfry at four P.M. That my communiqués were being intercepted was the only explanation that occurred to me. (Don't know if VA. kept his promise to poison my name back in England; maybe you've heard something? Don't overly care, but one would like to know.) Half-hoped J. might track me down to this hotel—in my second letter I wrote my whereabouts. Would even sleep with her if it could open a channel to Eva. Reminded myself I'd not committed any crime—va bene, hare*[sic]*splitter, not a crime against the Crommelynck-Ayrses that they know of—and it seems that J. was once again playing under her husband's baton. Probably always was. So I had no choice but to pay a call to the van de Veldes' town house.

Crossed dear old Minnewater Park in twilit sleet. Cold as the Urals. Ayrs's Luger had wanted to come along, so I'd buttoned my steel friend into my sheepskin's cavernous pocket. Jowly prostitutes smoked in the bandstand. Was not tempted for a moment—only the desperate venture out in this weather. Ayrs's ravages have put me off 'em, possibly for life. Outside the vd.V house cabriolets queued, horses snorted cold air, drivers huddled in long coats, smoking, stamping to keep warm. Windows were lit by vanilla lamps, fluttery debutantes, champagne flutes, fizzing chandeliers. A major social event was under way Perfect, I thought. Camouflage, you see. A happy couple climbed the steps with care, the door opened—Sesame—a gavotte escaped into the frozen air. Followed 'em up the salt-strewn steps and rapped the golden knocker, trying to remain calm.

The coattailed Cerberus recognized me—a surprised butler is never good news. "Je suis désolé, Monsieur, mais votre nom ne figure pas sur la liste des invités." Boot already in door. Guest lists, I warned him, don't apply to established family friends. The man smiled an apology—I was dealing with a professional. Sequined gaggle of mantled goslings streamed past me just then, and the butler unwisely let 'em pass me. Was halfway down the glittering hallway before the white-gloved hand clamped my shoulder. Snapped, must admit, in a most undignified manner—it's been an abysmal time, shan't deny it—and roared Eva's name, over and over, like a spoilt child in a temper tantrum, until the dance music collapsed and the hallway and stairs were packed with shocked revelers. Only the trombonist played on. That's trombonists for you. A beehive of consternation in all major languages opened up and swarmed forth. Through the ominous buzzing came Eva, in an electric blue ball gown, a rivière of green pearls. Think I shouted, "Why have you been avoiding me?" or something equally dignified.

E. did not glide through the air into my arms, melt into my embrace, and caress me with words of love. Her First Movement was Disgust: "What's happened to you, Frobisher?" A mirror hung in the hallway; looked to see what she meant. I'd let myself go, but I become a lax shaver

when composing, as you know. Second Movement, Surprise: “Madame Dhondt said you’d gone back to England.” Things went from worse to worst. Third Movement, Anger: “How dare you show your face here, after … everything?” Her parents had told her nothing but lies about me, I assured her. Why else had they intercepted my letters to her? She had received both my letters, she said, but shredded them “out of pity” Now rather shaken. Demanded to speak with her tête-à-tête. We had so much to sort out. A superficially handsome young fellow had his arm round her, and he barred my way and told me something in proprietorial Flemish. I told him in French he was pawing the girl I loved, adding that the war should have taught Belgians when to duck in the face of superior force. Eva caught his right arm, cupped his fist in both her hands. An intimate act, I see now. Caught her gallant’s name, muttered by a friend warning him not to belt me one: Grigoire. Bubble of jealousy deep in my gut now had a name. I asked of Eva who her fearsome lapdog was. “My fiancé,” she said, calmly, “and he’s not Belgian, he’s Swiss.”

Your what? Bubble popped, veins poisoned.

“I told you about him, that afternoon on the belfry! Why I came back from Switzerland, so much happier … I told you, but then you subjected me to those … humiliating letters.” No slip of her tongue or my pen. Grigoire the Fiancé. All those cannibals, feasting on my dignity There we were. My impassioned love? No such thing. Never was. That unseen trombonist was now monkeying about with “Ode to Joy” Roared at him with elemental violence—damaged my throat—to play it in the key Beethoven intended or not play it at all. Asked, “Swiss? Why’s he acting so aggressively, then?” Trombonist began a flatulent Beethoven’s Fifth, also in wrong key E.’s voice was one degree off absolute zero. “I think you’re ill, Robert. You should leave now.” Grigoire the Swiss Fiancé and the butler each clamped one of my unresisting shoulders and marched me backwards to the doorway through the herd. High, high above, I glimpsed two small v.d.Vs in their nightcaps peering down the stairwell through the landing railings like nightcapped gargoylettes. Winked at ’em.

Gleam of triumph in my rival’s lovely, long-lashed eyes and his accented “Go home to England!” ignited Frobisher the Rotter, sorry to say Just as I was flung over the threshold, I embraced Grigoire in a rugger grip, determined that smug cockatoo was coming with me. Birds-of-paradise in the hallway shrieked, baboons roared. Down the steps we bounced, no, we thudded, slipped, swore, thumped, and tore. Grigoire cried in alarm, then pain—the very medicine prescribed by Dr. Vengeance! Stone steps and icy pavements bruised my own flesh as black as his, banged my elbows and hips just as hard, but at least mine was not the only ruined evening in Bruges, and I yelled, kicking his ribs once for each word, before half-running, half-hobbling off on my whacked ankle, “Love hurts!”

Am in better spirits now. Hardly remember what E. even looks like. Once, her face was burned into my idiotic eyes, saw her everywhere, in everyone. Grigoire has exquisite fingers, long and pliant. Robert Schumann maimed his hands by tying weights to ’em. He thought itd increase his range at the keyboard. Majestic string quartets but what a bloody fool! Grigoire on the other hand possesses perfect hands by birth but probably doesn’t know a crotchet from crochet.

Six or seven days later

Forgot about this unfinished letter, well, half-forgot, it got buried under my piano MS & too busy composing to fish it out. Icy seasonal weather. Half the clocks in Bruges have frozen fast. So, now you know about Eva. The affair hollowed me out, but what, pray, resounds in hollows? Music, Sixsmith, let there be Music and behold. During a six-hour fireside bath last night I scored 102 bars of a funereal march based on “Ode to Joy” for my clarinetist.

Another visitor this morning; haven't been this popular since that notorious day at the Derby Woken at noon by a friendly but firm knock-knock-knock. Called out, "Who's there?"
"Verplancke."
Couldn't place the name, but when I opened the door, there stood my musical policeman, the one who had lent me the bicycle in my old life. "May I come in? Je pensais vous rendre une visite de courtoisie."
"Most certainly," I replied, adding rather wittily, "Voilà qui est bien courtois, pour un policier." Cleared him an armchair & offered to ring for tea, but my visitor declined. Couldn't quite conceal his surprise at the untidiness. Explained how I tip the maids to stay away Can't abide having my MS touched. M. Verplancke nodded in sympathy then wondered why a gentleman might check into his hotel under a pseudonym. An eccentricity inherited from my father, I said, a notable in public life who prefers to keep his private one private. Keep my own vocation similarly hush-hush so I'm not put upon to tinkle the ivories during cocktail hour. Refusals cause offense. V seemed satisfied with my explanation. "A luxurious home away from home, Le Royal." He glanced around my sitting room. "I did not know amanuenses were so well paid." Admitted what the tactful fellow doubtless already knew: Ayrs and I had parted company, adding I have my own independent income, which a mere twelve months ago would have been the truth. "Ah, a bicycling millionaire?" He smiled. Tenacious, isn't he? Not quite a millionaire, I smiled back, but, providentially, a man of sufficient consequence to afford Le Royal.
He got to the point at last. "You've made an influential enemy during your short residency in our city M. Frobisher. A certain manufacturer, I think we both know of whom I speak, made a complaint to my superior about an incident a few nights ago. His secretary—a very fine harpsichordist in our little group, in fact— recognized your name, and deflected the complaint to my desk. So here I am." Took pains to assure him it was all an absurd misunderstanding over a young lady's affections. Charming fellow nodded. "I know, I know. In youth, one's heart plays più fortissimo than the head. Our difficulty is, the young man's father is banker for several of our city elders and is making unpleasant noises about charging you with battery and assault."
Thanked M. Verplancke for his warning and tact, and promised to keep a lower profile from now on. Alas, not so simple. "Monsieur Frobisher, don't you find our city intolerably cold in winter? Don't you think Mediterranean climes might better inspire your Muse?"
Asked if the banker's anger might be appeased if I gave my word to leave Bruges within seven days, after my sextet's final revision. V thought yes, such an understanding should defuse the situation. So I gave my word as a gentleman to make the necessary arrangements.
Business concluded, V asked if he might have a preview of my sextet. Showed him the clarinet cadenza. He was unnerved at first by its spectral and structural peculiarities, but spent a further hour asking perceptive questions about my semi-invented notation and the singular harmonics of the piece. As we shook hands, he gave me his card, urged me to post a published copy of the score for his ensemble, and expressed regret that his public persona had had to impinge upon his private one. Was sorry to see him go. Writing is such a damn lonely sickness.
So you see, I must put my final days to good account. Don't worry about me, Sixsmith, I'm quite well, and far too busy for melancholia! There's a sailors' tavern at the end of the street where I could find companionship if I chose (one catches salty boys going in and out at any hour), but only music matters to me now. Music clatters, music swells, music tosses.

Sincerely,
R.F.

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HôTEL MEMLING, BRUGES
QUARTER PAST FOUR IN THE MORNING, 12TH—XII—1931

Sixsmith,

Shot myself through the roof of my mouth at five A.M. this morning with VA.'s Luger. But I saw you, my dear, dear fellow! How touched I am that you care so much! On the belfry's lookout, yesterday, at sunset. Sheerest fluke you didn't see me first. Had got to that last flight of stairs, when I saw a man in profile leaning on the balcony, gazing at the sea—recognized your natty gabardine coat, your one and only trilby One more step up, you'd have seen me crouching in the shadows. You strolled to the north side—one turn my way, I would have been rumbled. Watched you for as long as I dared—a minute?—before pulling back and hotfooting it down to Earth. Don't be cross. Thank you ever so for trying to find me. Did you come on the *Kentish Queen?*

Questions rather pointless now, aren't they?

Wasn't the sheerest fluke I saw you first, not really World's a shadow theater, an opera, and such things writ large in its libretto. Don't be too cross at my role. You couldn't understand, no matter how much I explained. You're a brilliant physicist, your Rutherford chap et al. agree you've got a brilliant future, quite sure they're right. But in some fundamentals you're a dunce. The healthy can't understand the emptied, the broken. You'd try to list all the reasons for living, but I left 'em behind at Victoria Station back in early summer. Reason I crept back down from the belvedere was that I can't have you blaming yourself for failing to dissuade me. You may anyway, but don't, Sixsmith, don't be such an ass.

Likewise, hope you weren't too disappointed to find me gone from Le Royal. The manager got wind of M. Verplancke's visit. Obliged to ask me to leave, he said, on account of heavy bookings. Piffle, but I took the fig leaf. Frobisher the Stinker wanted a tantrum, but Frobisher the Composer wanted peace and quiet to finish my sextet. Paid in full—bang went the last Jansch money— and packed my valise. Wandered crooked alleys and crossed icy canals before coming across this deserted-looking caravansary. Reception a rarely manned nook under the stairs. Only ornament in my room a monstrous Laughing Cavalier too ugly to steal and sell. From my filthy window, one sees the very same dilapidated old windmill on whose steps I napped on my first morning in Bruges. The very same. Fancy that. Around we go.

Knew I'd never see my twenty-fifth birthday. Am early for once. The lovelorn, the cry-for-helpers, all mawkish tragedians who give suicide a bad name are the idiots who rush it, like amateur conductors. A true suicide is a paced, disciplined certainty People pontificate, "Suicide is selfishness." Career churchmen like Pater go a step further and call it a cowardly assault on the living. Oafs argue this specious line for varying reasons: to evade fingers of blame, to impress one's audience with one's mental fiber, to vent anger, or just because one lacks the necessary suffering to sympathize. Cowardice is nothing to do with it—suicide takes considerable courage. Japanese have the right idea. No, what's selfish is to demand another to endure an intolerable existence, just to spare families, friends, and enemies a bit of soul-searching. The only selfishness lies in ruining strangers' days by forcing 'em to witness a

grotesque-ness. So I'll make a thick turban from several towels to muffle the shot and soak up the blood, and do it in the bathtub, so it shouldn't stain any carpets. Last night I left a letter under the manager's day-office door—he'll find it at eight A.M. tomorrow—informing him of the change in my existential status, so with luck an innocent chambermaid will be spared an unpleasant surprise. See, I do think of the little people.

Don't let 'em say I killed myself for love, Sixsmith, that would be too ridiculous. Was infatuated by Eva Crommelynck for a blink of an eye, but we both know in our hearts who is the sole love of my short, bright life.

Along with this letter and the rest of the Ewing book, I've made arrangements for a folder containing my completed manuscript to find you at Le Royal. Use the Jansch money to defray publishing costs, send copies to everyone on the enclosed list. Don't let my family get hold of either of the originals, whatever you do. Pater'll sigh, "It's no *Eroica,* is it?" and stuff it into a drawer; but it's an incomparable creation. Echoes of Scriabin's *White Mass,* Stravinsky's lost footprints, chromatics of the more lunar Debussy, but truth is I don't know where it came from. Waking dream. Will never write anything one-hundredth as good. Wish I were being immodest, but I'm not. *Cloud Atlas Sextet* holds my life, is my life, now I'm a spent firework; but at least I've been a firework.

People are obscenities. Would rather be music than be a mass of tubes squeezing semisolids around itself for a few decades before becoming so dribblesome it'll no longer function.

Luger here. Thirteen minutes to go. Feel trepidation, naturally, but my love of this coda is stronger. An electrical thrill that, like Adrian, I know I am to die. Pride, that I shall see it through. Certainties. Strip back the beliefs pasted on by governesses, schools, and states, you find indelible truths at one's core. Rome'll decline and fall again, Cortés'll lay Tenochtitlán to waste again, and later, Ewing will sail again, Adrian'll be blown to pieces again, you and I'll sleep under Corsican stars again, I'll come to Bruges again, fall in and out of love with Eva again, you'll read this letter again, the sun'll grow cold again. Nietzsche's gramophone record. When it ends, the Old One plays it again, for an eternity of eternities.

Time cannot permeate this sabbatical. We do not stay dead long. Once my Luger lets me go, my birth, next time around, will be upon me in a heartbeat. Thirteen years from now we'll meet again at Gresham, ten years later I'll be back in this same room, holding this same gun, composing this same letter, my resolution as perfect as my many-headed sextet. Such elegant certainties comfort me at this quiet hour.

Sunt lacrimæ rerum.

R.F.

THE PACIFIC JOURNAL OF ADAM EWING

join us. I am sorry to write, no man from either shift braved the first mate's displeasure by attending, but we shall persist in our efforts undiscouraged. Rafael was up the masthead & interrupted our prayers with a treble cry of "Land! a-hoyyyyyy!"

We ended our worship early & braved dousings of sea spray to watch land emerge from the

rocking horizon. “Raiatea,” Mr. Roderick told us, “of the Societies.” (Once again the *Prophetess’s* keel crosses the *Endeavours*. Cpt. Cook himself named the group.) I asked if we would be putting ashore. Mr. Roderick affirmed, “The captain wants to pay one of the Missions a call.” The Societies loomed larger & after three weeks of oceanic grays & blazing blues, our eyes rejoiced at the moss-drenched mountain faces, aglint with cataracts, daubed with cacophonous jungle. The *Prophetess* cleared fifteen fathoms, yet so clear was the water, iridescent corals were visible. I speculated with Henry on how we might prevail upon Cpt. Molyneux for permission to go ashore, when the very same appeared from the deckhouse, his beard trimmed & forelock oiled. Far from ignoring us, as is his custom, he walked over to us with a smile as friendly as a cutpurse’s. “Mr. Ewing, Dr. Goose, would you care to accompany the first mate & I ashore on yonder isle this morning? A settlement of Methodists lies in a bay on the northern coast, ‘Nazareth’ they’ve named it. Gentlemen of inquiring minds may find the place diverting.” Henry accepted with enthusiasm & I did not withhold my consent, though I mistrusted the old raccoon’s motivations. “Settled,” the captain pronounced.

An hour later the *Prophetess* kedged into Bethlehem Bay, a black-sand cove sheltered from trade winds by Cape Nazareth’s crook. Ashore was a stratum of cruder thatched dwellings erected on “stilts” near the waterline, occupied (I correctly assumed) by the baptized Indians. Above these were a dozen timber buildings crafted by civilized hands, & higher still, below the hill’s crown, stood a proud church denoted by a white cruciform. The larger of the skiffs was lowered for our benefit. Its four rowers were Guernsey Bentnail & a pair of garter snakes. Mr. Boerhaave donned a hat & waistcoat more suitable for a Manhattan salon than a haul across the surf. We beached with no mishap worse than a good soak, but our sole emissary from the colonists was a Polynesian dog panting under golden jasmine & vermilion trumpet flowers. The shoreline huts & “Main Street” winding up to the church were devoid of human life. “Twenty men, twenty muskets,” commented Mr. Boerhaave, “and the placed be ours by dinnertime. Makes you think, eh, sir?” Cpt. Molyneux instructed the rowers to wait in the shade while we “Call on the King in his Counting House.” My suspicion that the captain’s new graces were skin-deep was confirmed when he found the trading store boarded up & he vented a fanged oath. “Mayhap,” speculated the Dutchman, “the niggers unconverted themselves & ate their pastors for pudding?”

A bell rang from the church tower & the captain slapped his forehead. “D——my eyes, what am I thinking? It’s the Sabbath, by G—— & these holy s——s’ll be a-braying in their rickety church!” We wound our way up the steep hill at a crawl, our party slowed by Cpt. Molyneux’s gout. (I feel a loamy breathlessness when I exert myself. Recalling my vigor on the Chathams, I am worried at how severely the Parasite taxes my constitution.) We reached Nazareth’s house of worship just as the congregation was emerging.

The captain removed his hat, boomed a hearty “Greetings! Jonathon Molyneux, captain of the *Prophetess.”* He indicated our vessel in the bay with a sweep of his hand. The Nazarenes were less effusive, the men awarding us wary nods, their wives & daughters hiding behind fans. Cries of “Fetch Preacher Horrox!” echoed into the church recesses as its native occupants now poured out to see the visitors. Upwards of sixty adult men & women I counted, of whom around a third were White, garbed in their Sunday “Best” (as could be managed two weeks’ voyage from the nearest haberdashery). The Blacks watched us with bare curiosity The Native women were decently clothed, but more than a few were blighted with goiter. Boys protecting their fair-skinned mistresses from the sun’s fierceness with parasols of palm leaves grinned a little. A privileged “platoon” of Polynesians wore a natty brown shoulder band embroidered with a white crucifix as a uniform of sorts.

Now bounded out a cannonball of a man whose clerical garb declaimed his calling. “I,” announced the patriarch, “am Giles Horrox, preacher of Bethlehem Bay & representative of the

London Missionary Society on Raiatea. State your business, sirs, be quick about it."

Cpt. Molyneux now extended his introductions to include Mr. Boerhaave "of the Dutch Reformist Church," Dr. Henry Goose, "Physician of the London Gentry & late of the Feejee Mission" & Mr. Adam Ewing, "American Notary of Letters & Law." *(Now* I stood wise to the rogue's game!) "The names of Preacher Horrox & Bethlehem Bay are spoken of with respect amongst us peripatetic devout of the South Pacific. We had hoped to celebrate the Sabbath before your altar"—the captain looked ruefully at the church— "but, alas, contrary winds delayed our arrival. At the very least, I pray your collection plate is not yet closed?"

Preacher Horrox scrutinized our captain. "You command a godly ship, sir?"

Cpt. Molyneux glanced away in an imitation of humility "Neither as godly nor as unsinkable as your church, sir, but yes, Mr. Boerhaave & I do what we can for those souls in our care. 'Tis an unceasing struggle, I am sorry to say Sailors revert to their wanton ways as soon as our backs are turned."

"Oh, but, Captain," spoke a lady in a lace collar, "we have our recidivists in Nazareth too! You will pardon my husband's caution. Experience teaches us most vessels under so-called Christian flags bring us little but disease & drunkards. We must assume guilt until innocence is established."

The captain bowed again. "Madam, I can grant no pardon where no offense was given nor any taken."

"Your prejudices against those 'Visigoths of the Sea' are amply warranted, Mrs. Horrox"—Mr. Boerhaave entered the exchange— "but *I* won't tolerate a drop of grog aboard our *Prophetess,* however the men holler! & oh, they holler, but I holler back, 'The only spirit you need is the Holy Spirit!' & I holler it louder & longer!"

The charade was having its desired effect. Preacher Horrox presented his two daughters & three sons, all of whom were born here in Nazareth. (The girls might have stepped from a Ladies' School, but the boys were tanned as *kanákas* beneath their starched collars.) Loath as I was to be lassoed into the captain's masquerade, I was curious to learn more of this island theocracy & let the current of events carry me along. Soon our party proceeded to the Horroxes' parsonage, which dwelling would not shame any petty Southern Hemisphere consul. It included a large drawing room with glass windows & tulipwood furniture, a necessary room, two shacks for servants & a dining room, where presently we were served with fresh vegetables & tender pork. The table stood with each leg immersed in a dish of water. Mrs. Horrox explained, "Ants, one bane of Bethlehem. Their drowned bodies must be emptied periodically, lest they build a causeway of themselves."

I complimented the domicile. "Preacher Horrox," the lady of the house told us with pride, "was trained as a carpenter in the shire of Gloucester. Most of Nazareth was built by his hands. The pagan mind is impressed with material display, you see. He thinks:—How spick & span are Christians' houses! How dirty our hovels! How generous the White God is! How mean is ours!' In this way, one more convert is brought to the Lord."

"If I could but live my life over," opined Mr. Boerhaave, without the slightest blush, "I should chuse the missionary's selfless path. Preacher, we see here a well-established mission with roots struck deep, but how does one *begin* the work of conversion upon a benighted beach where no Christian foot ever trod?"

Preacher Horrox gazed beyond his interrogator to a future lecture hall. "Tenacity sir, compassion & law. Fifteen years ago our reception in this bay was not so cordial as your own, sir. That anvil-shaped island you see to the west, thither? Borabora, the Blacks call it, but Sparta is an apter name, so warlike were its warriors! On the beach of Bethlehem Cove we fought & some of us fell. Had our pistols not won that first week's battles, well, the Raiatea Mission should have remained a dream. But it was the will of the Lord that we light his beacon

here & keep it burning. After a half year we could bring over our womenfolk from Tahiti. I regret the Native deaths, but once the Indians saw how God protects his flock, why, even the Spartans were begging us to send preachers."

Mrs. Horrox took up the story. "When the pox began its deadly work, the Polynesians needed succor, both spiritual & material. Our compassion then brought the heathen to the holy font. Now 'tis the turn of Holy Law to keep our flock from Temptation— & marauding seamen. Whalers, particularly, despise us for teaching the women chastity & modesty Our men must keep our firearms well-oiled."

"Yet if shipwrecked," noted the captain, "I'll warrant those same spouters beg Fate to wash 'em up on beaches where those same 'cursed missionaries' have brought the Gospels, do they not?"

Assent was indignant & universal.

Mrs. Horrox answered my query about the enforcement of law & order in this lonesome outpost of Progress. "Our Church Council—my husband & three wise elders—passes those laws we deem necessary, with guidance of prayer. Our Guards of Christ, certain Natives who prove themselves faithful servants of the Church, enforce these laws in return for credit at my husband's store. Vigilance, unflagging vigilance, is vital, or by next week …" Mrs. Horrox shuddered as apostasy's phantoms danced a *hula* on her grave.

The meal over, we adjourned to the parlor, where a Native boy served us cool tea in pleasing gourd cups. Cpt. Molyneux asked, "Sir, how does one fund a Mission as industrious as yours?"

Preacher Horrox felt the breeze change & scrutinized the captain afresh. "Arrowroot starch & cocoa-nut oil defray costs, Captain. The Blacks work on our plantation to pay for the school, Bible study & church. In a week, God will it, we shall have an abundant harvest of copra."

I asked if the Indians worked of their own free will.

"Of course!" exclaimed Mrs. Horrox. "If they succumb to sloth, they know the Guards of Christ will punish them for it."

I wished to ask about these punitive incentives, but Cpt. Molyneux snatched back the conversation. "Your Missionary Society ship carries these perishable commodities back around the Horn to London?"

"Your conjecture is correct, Captain."

"Have you considered, Preacher Horrox, how more secure your Mission's secular footing—& by extension its *spiritual* one—would be, if you had a reliable market closer to the Societies?"

The preacher told the serving boy to quit the room. "I have considered this question at length, but where? Mexico's markets are small & prone to banditry, Cape Town is a marriage of corrupt excisemen & greedy Afrikaners. The South China Seas swarm with ruthless, saucy pirates. The Batavian Dutch bleed one dry. No offense, Mr. Boerhaave."

The captain indicated myself. "Mr. Ewing is a denizen of"—he paused to unveil his proposal—"San Francisco, California. You will know of its growth from a paltry town of seven hundred souls to a metropolis of … a quarter million? No census can keep count! Celestials, Chileans, Mexicans, Europeans, foreigners of all colors are flooding in by the day. An egg, Mr. Ewing, kindly inform us how much is presently paid for an egg in San Francisco."

"A dollar, so my wife wrote to me."

"One Yankee dollar for a common egg." (Cpt. Molyneux's smile is that of a mummified crocodile I once saw hanging in a Louisiana dry-goods store.) "Surely, this gives a man of your acumen some pause for thought?"

Mrs. Horrox was nobody's fool. "All the gold will be mined out soon."

"Aye, madam, but the hungry, clamoring, enriched city of San Francisco—only three weeks away by a trim schooner like my *Prophetess*—will remain & its destiny is clear as crystal. San

Francisco shall become the London, the Rotterdam & the New York of the Pacific Ocean."
Our *capitán de la casa* picked his teeth with a bluefin bone. "Do *you* believe, Mr. Ewing, commodities grown in our plantations may fetch a fair price in your city" (how strange 'tis hearing our modest township so appelled!) "both of the moment & after the gold rush?"
My truthfulness was a card Cpt. Molyneux had played to his devious advantage, but I would not lie to spite him any more than I would to aid him. "I do."
Giles Horrox removed his clergyman's collar. "Would you care to accompany me to my office, Jonathon? I am rather proud of its roof. I designed it myself to withstand the dreadful *typhoo."*

"Is that so, Giles?" replied Cpt. Molyneux. "Lead the way."

Notwithstanding the name of Dr. Henry Goose was unknown in Nazareth until this morning, once the wives of Bethlehem learned a famed English surgeon was ashore, they recalled all manner of ailments & beat a crowded path to the Parsonage. (So odd to be in the presence of the fairer sex again after so many days penned up with the uglier one!) My friend's generosity could not turn away a single caller, so Mrs. Horrox's salon was commandeered as his consultation room & draped with linen to provide appropriate screens. Mr. Boerhaave returned to the *Prophetess* to see about making more space in the hold.
I begged the Horroxes' leave to explore Bethlehem Bay, but its beach was unbearably hot & its sand flies pestilential, so I retraced our steps up the "Main Street" towards the church, whence issued the sound of psalmody. I intended to join in the afternoon worship. Not a soul, not a dog, not even a Native, stirred the Sabbath stillness. I peered into the dim church & so thick was the smoke within, I feared, erroneously, the building was aflame! The singing was now over & substituted by choruses of coughing. Fifty dark backs faced me & I realized the air was thick with the smoke not of fire nor incense but raw-cut tobacco! for every man jack of them was puffing on a pipe.
A rotund White stood in the pulpit sermonizing in that hybrid accent "Antipodean Cockney." This shew of informal religiosity did not offend until the content of the "sermon" became apparent. I quoth: "So it came to pass, see, Saint Peter, aye, 'im 'oo Mistah Jesus called Sweeter Peter Piper, he cameth from Rome an' he taughteth them hooky-nosed Jews in Palestine what was what with the Old Baccy, an' this is what I'm teachin' you now, see." Here he broke off to give guidance to an individual. "Nah, Tarbaby you're doing it all wrong, see, you load your baccy in *the fat* end, aye, that one, see, oh, J——s sneezed! how many times I told you, *this* is the *stem,* this is the d——d *bowl!* Do it like Mudfish next to you, nah, let me shew you!"
A sallow, stooping White leant against a cabinet (containing, I later verified, hundreds of Holy Bibles printed in Polynesian— I must request one as a souvenir ere our departure) watching the smoky proceedings. I made myself known to him in whispers so as not to distract the smokers from their sermon. The young man introduced himself as Wagstaff & explained the pulpit's occupant was "the Headmaster of the Nazareth Smoking School."
I confessed, such an academy was unknown to me.
"An idea of Father Upward's, at the Tahitian Mission. You must understand, sir, your typical Polynesian spurns industry because he's got no reason to value money. 'If I hungry' says he, 'I go pick me some, or catch me some. If I cold, I tell woman, "Weave!' " Idle hands, Mr. Ewing, & we both know what work the Devil finds for them. But by instilling in the slothful so-an'-sos a gentle craving for this harmless leaf, we give him an incentive to earn money, so he can buy his baccy—not liquor, mind, just baccy—from the Mission trading post. Ingenious, wouldn't you say?"
How could I disagree?

The light ebbs away. I hear children's voices, exotic avian octaves, the surf pounding the cove. Henry is grumbling at his cuff links. Mrs. Horrox, whose hospitality Henry & I are enjoying tonight, has sent her maid to inform us dinner is served.

Monday, 9th December—

A continuance of yesterday's narrative. After the smoking school was dismissed (several of the students were swaying & nauseous, but their teacher, an itinerant tobacco trader, assured us, "They'll be hooked like pufferfish in no time!"), the back of the heat was broken, though Cape Nazareth still broiled in glowing sunshine. Mr. Wagstaff strolled with me along the wooded arm of land shouldering northwards from Bethlehem Bay. The youngest son of a Gravesend curate, my guide had been drawn to the missionary's vocation since infancy The Society by arrangement with Preacher Horrox, sent him hither to wed a widow of Nazareth, Eliza, née Mapple, & be a father to her son, Daniel. He arrived on these shores last May.

What fortune, I declared, to dwell in such an Eden, but my pleasantry punctured the young man's spirits. "So I believed in my first days, sir, but now I don't rightly know. I mean, Eden's a spick 'n' span place, but every living thing runs wild here, it bites & scratches so. A pagan brought to God is a soul saved, I know it, but the sun never stops *burning* & the waves & stones are always so bright, my eyes ache till dusk comes. Times are, I'd give anything for a North Sea fog. The place puts a straining on *our* souls, to be truthful, Mr. Ewing. My wife's been here since she was a small girl, but that doesn't make it easier for her. You'd think the savages'd be grateful, I mean, we school them, heal them, bring employment & eternal life! Oh, they say 'Please, sir,' an' 'Thank you, sir' prettily enough, but you feel *nothing"*—Wagstaff pounded his heart—"here. Aye, *look* like Eden it might, but Raiatea is a fallen place, same as everywhere, aye, no snakes, but the Devil plies his trade here as much as anywhere else. The ants! Ants get everywhere. In your food, your clothes, your nose, even. Until we convert these accursed ants, these islands'll never be truly ours."

We arrived at his modest dwelling, crafted by his wife's first husband. Mr. Wagstaff did not invite me in but went inside to fetch a flask of water for our walk. I took a turn around the modest front garden, where a Black gardener was hoeing. I asked what he was growing.

"David is dumb," a woman called to me from the doorway dressed in a loosened, grubby pinafore. I am afraid I can only describe her appearance and manner as slovenly. "Dumb as a stone. You're the English doctor staying at the Horroxes'."

I explained I was an American notary & asked if I might be addressing Mrs. Wagstaff.

"My wedding banns and marriage lines say so, yes."

I said Dr. Goose was holding an ad hoc surgery at the Horroxes', if she wished to consult with him. I assured her of Henry's excellence as a physician.

"Excellent enough to spirit me away, restore the years I've wasted here & set me up in London with a stipend of three hundred pounds per annum?"

Such a request was beyond my friend's powers, I admitted.

"Then your excellent physician can do nothing for me, sir."

I heard giggles in the bushes beyond me, turned around & saw a host of little Black boys (I was curious to note so many light-skinned issue of "cross-racial" unions). I ignored the children & turned back to see a White boy of twelve or thirteen, as grubby as his mother, slip by Mrs. Wagstaff, who did not attempt to waylay him. Her son frolicked as naked as his Native playmates! "Ho, there, young fellow," I reprimanded, "won't you get a sunstroke running about in that state?" The boy's blue eyes held a feral glint & his answer, barked in a Polynesian tongue, baffled me as much as it amused the pickaninnies, who flew off like a flock

of greenfinches.
Mr. Wagstaff followed in the boy's wake, much agitated. "Daniel! Come back! *Daniel!* I know you hear me! I'll lash you! Do you hear? I'll lash you!" He turned back to his wife. "*Mrs.* Wagstaff! Do you *want* your son to grow up a savage? At the very least make the boy wear clothes! Whatever will Mr. Ewing be thinking?"
Mrs. Wagstaff's contempt for her young husband, if bottled, could have been vended as rat poison. "Mr. Ewing will think whatever Mr. Ewing will think. Then, tomorrow, he will leave on his handsome schooner, taking his thinkings with him. Unlike you & I, *Mr.* Wagstaff, who'll die here. Soon, I pray God." She turned to me. "My husband could not compleat his schooling, sir, so it is my sorry lot to explain the obvious, ten times a day."
Averse to seeing Mr. Wagstaff's humiliation at the hands of his wife, I gave a noncommittal bow & withdrew outside the fence. I heard male indignation trampled by female scorn & concentrated my attention on a nearby bird, whose refrain, to my ears, sounded thus:—*Toby isn't telling, nooo … Toby isn't telling …*
My guide joined me, most visibly glum. "Beg pardon, Mr. Ewing, Mrs. Wagstaff's nerves are fearful frayed today. She don't sleep much on account of the heat & flies." I assured him the "eternal afternoon" of the South Seas taxes the sturdiest physiologies. We walked under slimy fronds, along the tapering headland, noxious with fertility & furry caterpillars, plump as my thumb, dropped from talons of exquisite heliconia.
The young man narrated how the Mission had assured Mr. Wagstaff's family of his intended's impeccable breeding. Preacher Horrox had married them a day after his arrival in Nazareth, while the enchantment of the Tropics still dazzled his eyes. (Why Eliza Mapple had consented to such an arranged union remains uncertain: Henry speculates the latitude & clime "unhinges" the weaker sex & renders them pliable.) Mr. Wagstaff's bride's "infirmities," true age & Daniel's obstreperous nature came to light scarcely after their signatures on the wedding documents had dried. The stepfather had tried beating his new charge, but this led to such "wicked recriminations" from both mother & stepson that he knew not where to turn. Far from helping Mr. Wagstaff, Preacher Horrox chastised him for a weakling & the truth is, nine days out of ten he is wretched as Job. (Whatever Mr. Wagstaff's misfortunes, could any compare to a parasitic Worm gnawing his cerebral canals?)
Thinking to distract the brooding youth with matters more logistical, I asked why such an abundance of Bibles lay untouched (& read only by book lice, to tell the truth) in the church.
"Preacher Horrox should by rights tell it, but briefly, the Matavia Bay Mission first translated the Lord's Word into Polynesian & Native missionaries using those Bibles achieved so many conversions that Elder Whitlock—one of Nazareth's founders what's dead now—convinced the Mission to repeat the experiment here. He'd once been 'pren-ticed to a Highgate engraver, see. So with guns & tools the first missionaries brought a printing press, paper, bottles of ink, trays of type & reams of paper. Within ten days of founding Bethlehem Bay, three thousand primers was printed for Mission schools, before theyd dug the gardens, even. Nazareth Gospels came next & spread the Word from the Societies to the Cooks to Tonga. But now the press is rusted up, we've got thousands of Bibles begging for an owner & why?"
I could not guess.
"Not enough Indians. Ships bring disease dust here, the Blacks breathe it in & they swell up sick & fall like spinny tops. We teach the survivors about monogamy & marriage, but their unions aren't fruitful." I found myself wondering how many months had passed since last Mr. Wagstaff smiled. "To kill what you'd cherish & cure," he opined, "that seems to be the way of things."
The path ended down by the sea at a crumbling "ingot" of black coral, twenty yards in length & in height two men. "A *marae,* this is called," Mr. Wagstaff informed me. "All over the South

Seas you see 'em, I'm told." We scrambled up & I had a fine view of the *Prophetess,* an easy "dip" away for a lusty swimmer. (Finbar emptied a vat over the side & I spied Autua's black silhouette atop the mizzen, furling the fore-skysail lifts.)

I inquired after the origins & purpose of the *marae* & Mr. Wagstaff obliged, with brevity. "Just one generation ago, the Indians did their screaming & bloodletting & sacrificing to their false idols right on these stones where we're standing." My thoughts went back to the Banquet Beach on Chatham Isle. "The Christ Guards gives any Black who sets foot here now a hefty flogging. Or would do. The Native children don't even know the names of the old idols no more. It's all rats' nests & rubble now. That's what all beliefs turn to one day. Rats' nests & rubble."

Plumeria petals and scent enwrapped me.

My neighbor at the dinner table was Mrs. Derbyshire, a widow well into her sixth decade, as bitter & hard as green acorns. "I confess to a disrelish for Americans," she told me. "They killed my treasured uncle Samuel, a colonel in His Majesty's Artillery, in the War of 1812." I gave my (unwanted) condolences, but added that notwithstanding my own treasured uncle was killed by Englishmen in the same conflict, some of my closest friends were Britons. The doctor laughed too loudly & ejaculated, "Hurrah, Ewing!"

Mrs. Horrox seized the rudder of conversation ere we ran onto reefs. "Your employers evince great faith in your talents, Mr. Ewing, to entrust you with business necessitating such a long & arduous voyage." I replied that, yes, I was a senior enough notary to be entrusted with my present assignment, but a junior enough scrivener to be obligated to accept the same. Knowing clucks rewarded my humility

After Preacher Horrox had said grace over the bowls of turtle soup & invoked God's blessing on his new business venture with Cpt. Molyneux, he sermonized upon a much-beloved topic as we ate. "I have always unswervingly held, that God, in our Civilizing World, manifests himself not in the Miracles of the Biblical Age, but in Progress. It is Progress that leads Humanity up the ladder towards the Godhead. No Jacob's Ladder this, no, but rather 'Civilization's Ladder,' if you will. Highest of all the races on this ladder stands the Anglo-Saxon. The Latins are a rung or two below. Lower still are Asiatics—a hardworking race, none can deny, yet lacking our Aryan bravery. Sinologists insist they once aspired to greatness, but where is your yellow-hued Shakespeare, eh, or your almond-eyed da Vinci? Point made, point taken. Lower down, we have the Negro. Good-tempered ones may be trained to work profitably, though a rumbunctious one is the Devil incarnate! The American Indian, too, is capable of useful chores on the Califor-nian *barrios,* is that not so, Mr. Ewing?"

I said 'tis so.

"Now, our Polynesian. The visitor to Tahiti, O-hawaii, or Bethlehem for that matter, will concur that the Pacific Islander may, with careful instruction, acquire the A-B-C of literacy, numeracy & piety thereby surpassing the Negroes to rival Asiatics in industri-ousness."

Henry interrupted to note that the Maori have risen to the "D-E-F" of mercantilism, diplomacy & colonialism.

"Proves my point. Last, lowest & least come those 'Irreclaimable Races,' the Australian Aboriginals, Patagonians, various African peoples &c, just one rung up from the great apes & so obdurate to Progress that, like mastodons & mammoths, I am afraid a speedy 'knocking off the ladder'—after their cousins, the Guanches, Canary Islanders & Tasmanians—is the kindest

prospect."
"You mean"—Cpt. Molyneux finished his soup—"extinction?"
"I do, Captain, I do. Nature's Law & Progress move as one. Our own century shall witness humanity's tribes fulfill those prophecies writ in their racial traits. The superior shall relegate the overpopu-lous savages to their natural numbers. Unpleasant scenes may ensue, but men of intellectual courage must not flinch. A glorious order shall follow, when all races shall know & aye, embrace, their place in God's ladder of civilization. Bethlehem Bay offers a glimpse of the coming dawn."
"Amen to that, Preacher," replied Cpt. Molyneux. One Mr. Gosling (fiancé of Preacher Horrox's eldest daughter) wrung his hands in oleaginous admiration. "If I dare be so bold, sir, it strikes me as almost … yes, a *deprivation* to let your theorem go unpublished, sir. 'The Horrox Ladder of Civilization' would set the Royal Society alight!"
Preacher Horrox said, "No, Mr. Gosling, my work is here. The Pacific must find itself another Descartes, another Cuvier."
"Wise of you, Preacher"—Henry clapped a flying insect & examined its remains—"to keep your theory to yourself."
Our host could not conceal his irritation. "How so?"
"Why, under scrutiny it is obvious a 'theorem' is redundant when a simple law suffices."
"What law would that be, sir?"
"The first of 'Goose's Two Laws of Survival.' It runs thus, 'The weak are meat the strong do eat.' "
"But your 'simple law' is blind to the fundamental mystery, 'Why do White races hold dominion over the world?' "
Henry chuckled & loaded an imaginary musket, aimed down its barrel, narrowed his eye, then startled the company with a "Bang! Bang! Bang! See? Got him before he blew his blowpipe!"
Mrs. Derbyshire uttered a dismayed "Oh!"
Henry shrugged. "Where is the fundamental mystery?"
Preacher Horrox had lost his good humour. "Your implication is that White races rule the globe not by divine grace but by the musket? But such an assertion is merely the *same* mystery dressed up in borrowed clothes! How is it that the musket came to the White man & not, say, the Esquimeau or the Pygmy if not by august will of the Almighty?"
Henry obliged. "Our weaponry was not dropped onto our laps one morning. It is not *manna* from Sinai's skies. Since Agincourt, the White man has refined & evolved the gunpowder sciences until our modern armies may field muskets by the tens of thousands! Aha!' you will ask, yes, 'But why us Aryans? Why not the Unipeds of Ur or the Mandrakes of Mauritius?' Because, Preacher, of all the world's races, our love—or rather our *rapacity*—for treasure, gold, spices & dominion, oh, most of all, sweet dominion, is the keenest, the hungriest, the most unscrupulous! This rapacity yes, powers our Progress; for ends infernal or divine I know not. Nor do you know, sir. Nor do I overly care. I feel only gratitude that my Maker cast me on the winning side."
Henry's forthrightness was misconstrued as incivility & Preacher Horrox, the Napoleon of his equatorial Elba, was pinkening with indignation. I complimented our hostess's soup (though in truth my craving for vermicide makes it difficult to ingest any but the plainest fare) & asked if the turtles were caught on nearby beaches or imported from afar.

Later, lying abed in the muggy darkness, eavesdropped by geckos, Henry confided that the day's surgery had been "a parade of hysterical sun-baked women who need no medicine but hosiers, milliners, bonnet makers, perfumeries & sundry trappings of their sex!" His "consultations," he elaborated, were one part medicine, nine parts tittle-tattle. "They swear their husbands are tupping the Native women & live in mortal fear they'll catch 'something.' Handkerchiefs aired in rotation."

His confidences made me uneasy & I ventured that Henry might practice a little reserve when disagreeing with our host. "Dearest Adam, I *was* practicing reserve, & more than a little! I longed to shout *this* at the old fool:—'Why tinker with the plain truth that we hurry the darker races to their graves in order to take their land & its riches? Wolves don't sit in their caves, concocting crapulous theories of race to justify devouring a flock of sheep! "Intellectual courage"? True "intellectual courage" is to dispense with these fig leaves & admit all peoples are predatory, but White predators, with our deadly duet of disease dust & firearms, are examplars of predacity par excellence, & what of it?' "

It upsets me that a dedicated healer & gentle Christian can succumb to such cynicism. I asked to hear Goose's Second Law of Survival. Henry grinned in the dark & cleared his throat. "The second law of survival states that there *is* no second law. Eat or be eaten. That's it." He began snoring soon after, but my Worm kept me awake until the stars began weakening. Geckos fed & padded softly over my sheet.

Dawn was sweating & scarlet as passionfruit. Male & female Natives alike drudged up "Main Street" to the church plantations atop the hill, where they worked until the afternoon heat was intolerable. Before the skiff came to take Henry & me back to the *Prophetess,* I went to watch the workers plucking weeds from the copra. Peradventure it fell to young Mr. Wagstaff to be their overseer this morning & he had a Native boy bring us cocoa-nut milk. I withheld from asking after his family & he did not mention them. He carries a whip, "but I rarely employ it myself that's what the Guard of Christ the King are for. I just watch the watchers," he said. Three of these dignitaries watched their fellows, leading hymns ("land shanties") & reprimanding slackers. Mr. Wagstaff was less inclined to conversation than yesterday & let my pleasantries lapse into silence broken only by sounds of the jungle & laborers. "You're thinking, aren't you, that we've made slaves out of free peoples?"

I avoided the question by saying Mr. Horrox had explained their labors paid for the benefits of Progress brought by the Mission. Mr. Wagstaff did not hear me. "There exists a tribe of ants called the slave maker. These insects raid the colonies of common ants, steal eggs back to their own nests & after they hatch, why, the stolen slaves become workers of the greater empire & never even dream they were once stolen. Now if you ask me, Lord Jehovah crafted these ants as a model, Mr. Ewing." Mr. Wagstaff's gaze was gravid with the ancient future. "For them with the eyes to see it."

People of shifting character unnerve me & Mr. Wagstaff was one such. I made my excuses & proceeded to my next port of call, viz., the schoolroom. Here, infant Nazarenes of both hues study Scripture, arithmetic, and their ABC's. Mrs. Derbyshire teaches the boys & Mrs. Horrox the girls. In the afternoon the White children have an additional three hours' tutelage in a curriculum appropriate to their station (though Daniel Wagstaff for one appears immune to his educators' wiles), while their darker playmates join their parents in the fields before the daily vespers.

A short revue was staged in my honor. Ten girls, five White, five Black, recited a Holy

Commandment apiece. Then I was treated to “O! Home Where Thou Art Loved the Best” accompanied by Mrs. Horrox on an upright piano whose past was more glorious than its present. The girls were then invited to ask the visitor questions, but only White misses raised their hands. “Sir, do you know George Washington?” (Alas, no.) “How many horses pull your carriage?” (My father-in-law keeps four, but I prefer to ride a single mount.) The littlest asked of me, “Do ants get headaches?” (Had her classmates’ titters not reduced my interrogator to tears, I should be standing there pondering this question still.) I told the students to live by the Bible & obey their elders, then took my leave. Mrs. Hor-rox told me departees were once presented with a garland of plumeria, but the Mission elders deemed garlands immoral. “If we allow garlands today, it will be dancing tomorrow. If there is dancing tomorrow …” She

shuddered. ’Tis a pity

By noon the men had loaded the cargo & the *Prophetess* was kedging out of the bay against unfavorable winds. Henry & I have retired to the mess room to avoid the spray & oaths. My friend is composing an epic in Byronic stanzas entitled “True History of Autua, Last Moriori” & interrupts my journal writing to ask what rhymes with what:—“Streams of blood”? “Themes of mud”? “Robin Hood”?

I recall the crimes Mr. Melville imputes to Pacific missionaries in his recent account of the *Typee*. As with cooks, doctors, notaries, clergymen, captains & kings, might evangelists also not be some good, some bad? Maybe the Indians of the Societies & the Chathams would be happiest “undiscovered,” but to say so is to cry for the moon. Should we not applaud Mr. Horrox’s & his brethren’s efforts to assist the Indian’s climb up “Civilization’s Ladder”? Is not ascent their sole salvation?

I know not the answer, nor whence flew the surety of my younger years.

During my night at the Horroxes’ Parsonage, a burglar broke into my coffin & when the reprobate could not locate my jackwood trunk’s key (I wear it around my neck), he attempted to force the lock. Had he succeeded, Mr. Busby’s deeds & documents would now be fodder for sea horses. How I wish our captain was cut from trustworthy Cpt. Beale’s cloth! I dare not give Cpt. Molyneux custody of my valuables & Henry warned me against “stirring the hornets’ nest” by raising the attempted crime with Mr. Boerhaave, lest an investigation spur every thief

aboard to try his luck whenever my back is turned. I suppose he is right.

Monday, 16th December

Today at noon the sun was vertical & that customary humbuggery known as “Crossing the Line” was let loose, by which “Virgins” (those crewmen crossing the equator for the first time) endure various hazings & duckings, as thought fit by those Tars conducting ceremonies. The sensible Cpt. Beale did not waste time on this during my Australia-bound voyage, but the seamen of the *Prophetess* were not to be denied their fun. (I considered all notions of “fun” to be an anathema to Mr. Boerhaave, until I saw what cruelties these “amusements” entailed.) Finbar warned us the two “Virgins” were Rafael & Bentnail. The latter has been at sea for two years but sailed only the Sydney– Cape Town run.

During the dogwatch the men slung an awning over the fore-deck & assembled around the capstan, where “King Neptune” (Pocock, dressed in absurd robe with a squilgee wig) was holding court. The Virgins were tied to the catheads like a pair of Saint Sebastians. “Sawbone & Mr. Quillcock!” cried Pocock upon seeing Henry & me. “Art thou come to rescue our virgin sisters from my scabdragon?” Pocock danced with a marlinespike in a vulgar fashion & the

seamen clapped with lickerish laughter. Henry, laughing, retorted that he preferred *his* virgins without beards. Pocock's riposte on maidens' beards is too obscene to record.

His Barnacled Majesty turned back to his victims. "Bentnail of Cape Town, Riff-the-Raff of Convict-town, be you ready to enter the Order of the Sons of Neptune?" Rafael, his boyish spirits restored in part by the anticks, responded with a brisk, "Aye, Your Lordship!" Bentnail gave a surly nod. Neptune roared, "Naaaaaay! Not till we shave those d——d scales off you sogerers! Bring me the shaving cream!" Torgny hurried up with a pail of tar, which he applied to the prisoners' faces with a brush. Next, Guernsey appeared, dressed as Queen Amphitrite & removed the tar with a razor. The Cape man howled curses, which caused much merriment & not a few "slips" of the razor. Rafael had the sound sense to bear his ordeal in silence. "Better, better," growled Neptune, before yelling, "Blindfold 'em both & shew Young Riff into my courtroom!"

This "courtroom" was a barrel of salt water into which Rafael was plunged headfirst while the men chanted to twenty after which Neptune commanded his "courtiers" to "fish out my newest citizen!" His blindfold was removed & the boy leant against the bulwarks to recover from his hazing.

Bentnail acquiesced less willingly yelling, "Unhand me you sons of w——s!" King Neptune rolled his eyes in horror. "That stinking mouth needs *forty* o' the best in the brine, boys, or me eyes ain't mates!" On the count of forty the Afrikaner was raised, baying, "I'll kill every last one of you sons of sows, I swear I will I—" To general hilarity he was submerged for another forty When Neptune declared his sentence served, he could do nothing but choke & retch feebly. Mr. Boerhaave now ended the skylarking & the newest Sons of Neptune cleaned their faces with oakum & a bar of toilet soap.

Finbar was still chuckling at dinner. Cruelty has never made me smile.

Wednesday, 18th December

Scaly seas, barely a breath of wind, therm. remains about 90°. The crew have washed their hammocks & triced them up to dry My headaches commence earlier daily & Henry has once more increased my dosage of vermicide. I pray his supply will not be depleted ere we drop anchor in O-hawaii, for the pain unameliorated would shatter my skull. Elsewhere my doctor is kept busy by much erysipelas & bilious cholera on the *Prophetess*.

This afternoon's fitful siesta was cut short by clamor, so I went on deck & there found a young shark being baited & hoisted aboard. It writhed in its own brilliant ruby juices for a considerable time before Guernsey declared it well & truly dead. Its mouth & eyes called to mind Tilda's mother. Finbar butchered its carcass on deck & could not altogether ruin its succulence in his galley (a woody scrod fish). The more superstitious sailors spurned this treat, reasoning sharks are known to eat men, thus to eat shark flesh is cannibalism by proxy. Mr.

Sykes spent a profitable afternoon making sandpaper from the hide of the great fish.

Friday, 20th December

Can it be that the cockroaches grow fat on me as I sleep? This morning one woke me by crawling over my face & attempting to feed from my nostril. Truly, it was six inches long! I was possessed of a violent urge to kill the giant bug, but in my cramped, gloomy cabin it had the advantage. I complained to Finbar, who urged me to pay a dollar for a specially trained

“roach rat.” Later, doubtless, he will want to sell me a “rat cat” to subdue the roach rat, then I will need a cat hound & who knows where it will all end?

Sunday, 22nd December—

Hot, so hot, I melt & itch & blister. This morn I awoke to the laments of fallen angels. I listened in my coffin, as moments unfolded into minutes, wondering what new devilry my Worm was working, until I made out a booming cry from above:—“There she blows!” I uncovered my porthole, but the hour was too dim to see clearly, so despite my weakness I forced myself up the companion-way. “There, sir, there!” Rafael steadied me by my waist with one hand as he pointed with the other. I gripped the handrail tight, for my legs are unsteady now. The boy kept pointing. “There! Ain’t they a marvel, sir?” By the crepuscular light I beheld a spume, only thirty feet from the starboard prow. “Pod o’ six!” shouted Autua, from aloft. I heard the Cetaceans’ breathing, then felt the droplets of spume shower upon us! I agreed with the boy, they make a sublime sight indeed. One heaved itself up, down & beneath the waves. The flukes of the fish stood in silhouette against the rose-licked east. “More’s the pity we ain’t a spouter, I says,” commented New-fie. “Must be a hundred barrels o’ spermaceti in the big un alone!” Pocock snapped. “Not I! I shipped on a spouter once, the cap’n was the blackest brute you’ve ever seen, them three years make *Prophetess* seem a Sunday pleasure punt!”
I am back in my coffin, resting. We are passing through a great nursery of humpbacks. The cry “There she blows!” is heard so often that none now bother to watch. My lips are baked & peeled.

The color of monotony is blue.

Christmas Eve—

A gale & heavy seas & ship rolling much. My finger is so swollen, Henry had to cut off my wedding band lest it prevent circulation & cause the onset of dropsy. Losing this symbol of my union with Tilda depressed my spirits beyond all measure. Henry berates me for being a “silly puffin” & insists my wife would set my health above a fortnight without a metal loop. The band is in my doctor’s safekeeping, for he knows a Spanish goldsmith in Honolulu who will repair it for a reasonable price.

Christmas Day

Long swells left by yesterday’s gale. At dawn the waves looked like mountain ranges tipped with gold as sunbeams slanted low under burgundy clouds. I rallied all my strength to reach the mess room where Mr. Sykes & Mr. Green had accepted Henry’s & my invitation to our private Christmas Meal. Finbar served a less noxious dinner than is his wont, of “lobscouse” (salt beef, cabbage, yam & onion), so I was able to stomach most of it, until later. The plum duff had never seen a plum. Cpt. Molyneux sent word to Mr. Green that the men’s grog ration was doubled, so by the afternoon watch the seamen were flown. A regular saturnalia. A quantity of small beer was poured down a luckless Diana monkey, who capped its crapulous mummery by jumping overboard. I retired to Henry’s cabin & together we read the second chapter of Matthew.

The dinner wrought havoc on my digestion & necessitated frequent visits to the head. On my last visit, Rafael was waiting outside. I apologized for delaying him, but the boy said, no, he had contrived this meeting. He confessed he was troubled & posed me this question: "God lets you in, doesn't he, if you're sorry … no matter what you do, he don't send you to … y'know"—here the 'prentice mumbled—"hell?"

I own, my mind was more on digestion than on theology & I blurted out that Rafael could hardly have notched up a mortal portfolio of sin in his few years. The storm lantern swung & I saw misery distort my young brave's face. Regretting my levity I affirmed the Almighty's mercy is indeed infinite, that "joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety & nine just persons, which need no repentance." Did Rafael wish to confide in me, I asked, be it as a friend, or a fellow orphan, or a relative stranger? I told him I had noticed how downcast he seemed of late & lamented how altered was that blithe boy who had stepped aboard in Sydney, so eager to see the wide world. Ere he framed his reply, however, an attack of laxity obliged me to return to the head. When I emerged, Rafael was gone. I shall not press the matter. The boy knows where he can find me.

Later—

Seven bells of the first watch were just smote. My Worm pains my head as if the clapper strikes my skull. *(Do* ants get headaches? I gladly should be turned into an ant to be freed from these agonies.) How Henry & others sleep through this din of debauchery & blasphemous caroling I know not, but keenly I envy them.

I snuffed some vermicide, but it no longer brings elation. It merely helps me feel halfway ordinary. Then I took a turn about the decks, but the Star of David was obscured by thick clouds. A few sober shouts aloft (Autua's amongst them) & Mr. Green at the wheel assured me that not all the crew were "sixteen sheets to the wind." Empty bottles rolled from port to starboard & back with the swell. I stumbled upon an insensible Rafael curled around the windlass, his corrupted hand gripping his empty pewter. His bare young chest was bespattered by ocherous smearages. That the boy had found his solace in drink instead of his friend-in-Christ made my own spirits glummer.

"Guilty thoughts disturbing your rest, Mr. Ewing?" spoke a suc-cubus at my shoulder & I dropped my pipe. It was Boerhaave. I assured the Hollander that while my conscience was quite untroubled I doubted *he* could claim as much. Boerhaave spat overboard, smiling. Had fangs & horns sprouted I should have felt no surprise. He slung Rafael over his shoulder, slapped the sleeping 'prentice's buttocks & carried his somnolent burden to the after-hatch, to keep him out of harm's way, I trust.

Boxing Day—

Yesterday's entry sentences me to a prison of remorse for the rest of my days. How perversely it reads, how flippant I was! Oh, I am sick to write these words. Rafael has hanged himself. Hanged, by means of a noose slung over the mainmast lower yardarm. He ascended his gallows between the end of his watch & first bell. Fate decreed I should be amongst his discoverers. I was leaning over the bulwark, for the Worm causes bouts of nausea as it is expelled. In the blue half-light I heard a cry & saw Mr. Roderick gazing heavenward. Confusion twisted his face; succeeded by disbelief; folding in grief. His lips formed a word, yet no word issued. He pointed to that he could not name.

There swung a body, a gray form brushing the canvas. Noise erupted from all quarters, but

who was shouting what to whom I cannot recall. Rafael, hanged, steady as a plumb lead as the *Prophetess* pitched & rolled. That amiable boy, lifeless as a sheep on a butcher's hook! Autua had scrambled aloft, but all he could do was lower the boy down gently. I heard Guernsey mutter, "Should never o' sailed on Friday, Friday's the Jonah."

My mind burns with the question, *Why?* None will discuss it, but Henry, who is as horrified as myself, told me that, secretly, Bentnail had intimated to him that the unnatural crimes of Sodom were visited upon the boy by Boerhaave & his "garter snakes." Not just on Christmas night, but every night for many weeks.

My duty is to follow this dark river to its source & impose justice on the miscreants but, Lord, I can scarce sit up to feed myself! Henry says I cannot flagellate myself whene'er innocence falls prey to savagery, but how can I let this be? Rafael was Jackson's age. I feel such impotence, I cannot bear it.

Friday, 27th December—

Whilst Henry was called away to attend an injury, I hauled myself to Cpt. Molyneux's cabin to speak my mind. He was displeazed at being visited, but I would not quit his quarters until my charge was stated, to wit, Boerhaave's pack had tormented Rafael with nightly bestiality until the boy, seeing no possibility of reprieve or relief, took his life. Finally, the captain asked, "You do, of course, have evidence for this crime? A suicide letter? Signed testimonials?" Every man aboard knew I spoke the truth! The captain could not be insensible of Boerhaave's brutality! I demanded an inquiry into the first mate's part in Rafael's self-slaughter.

"Demand all you wish, Mr. Quillcock!" Cpt. Molyneux shouted. "*I* decide who sails *Prophetess,* who maintains discipline, who trains the 'prentices, not a d——d pen pusher, not his d——d ravings & by God's Blood not any d——d 'inquiry! Get out, sir, & blast you!"

I did so & immediately collided with Boerhaave. I asked him if he was going to lock *me* up in his cabin with his garter snakes, then hope *I*'d hang myself before dawn? He showed his fangs and in a voice laden with venom and hatred, issued this warning: "The stink of decay is on you, Quillcock, no man of mine would touch you lest he contract it. You'll die soon of your low fever.' "

Notaries of the United States, I had the wit to warn him, do not vanish as conveniently as colonial cabin boys. I believe he entertained the notion of strangling me. But I am too sickly to be afraid of a Dutch sodomite.

Later—

Doubt besieges my conscience & complicity is its charge. Did *I* give Rafael the permission he sought to commit self-slaughter? Had I divined his misery when last he spoke to me, interpreted his intention & replied, "No, Rafael, the Lord cannot forgive a *planned* suicide, for repentance cannot be true if it occurs *before* the crime," the boy may yet be drawing breath. Henry insists I could not have known, but for once his words ring hollow to my ears. Oh, did *I*

send that poor Innocent to Hell?

Saturday, 28th December—

A magic-lantern show in my mind has the boy taking the rope, ascending the mast, knotting his noose, steadying himself, addressing his Maker, launching himself into vacancy. As he rushed through the black, did he feel serenity or dread? The snap of his neck.

Had I but known! I could have helped the child jump ship, deflect his destiny as the Channings did mine, or help him understand that no state of tyranny reigns forever.

The *Prophetess* has every inch of canvas aloft & is "sailing like a witch" (not for any benefit of mine, but because the cargo is rotting) & makes over 3° of latitude daily. I am terribly sick now & confined to my coffin. I suppose Boerhaave believes I am hiding from him. He is deceived, for the righteous vengeance I wish to visit upon his head is one of the few flames unextinguished by this dreadful torpor. Henry beseeches me write my journal to occupy my brain, but my pen grows unwieldy & heavy. We make Honolulu in three days. My loyal doctor promises to accompany me ashore, spare no expense to obtain powerful paregorics & remain at my bedside until my recovery is compleat, even if the *Prophetess* must leave for California without us. God bless this best of men. I can write no more today

Sunday, 29th December—

I fare most ill.

Monday, 30th December—

The Worm is recrudescent. Its poison sacs have burst. I am racked with pain & bedsores & a dreadful thirst. Oahu is still two or three days to the north. Death is hours away. I cannot drink & do not recall when I ate last. I made Henry promise to deliver this journal to Bedford's in Honolulu. From there it will reach my bereaved family. He swears I shall deliver it on my own two feet, but my hopes are blasted. Henry has done his valiant best, but my parasite is too virulent & I must entrust my soul to its Maker.

Jackson, when you are a grown man do not permit your profession to sunder you from loved ones. During my months away from home, I thought of you & your mother with constant fondness & should it come to pass […] *

Sunday, 12th January—

The temptation to begin at the perfidious end is strong, but this diarist shall remain true to chronology On New Year's Day, my head pains were rolling so thunderously I was taking Goose's medicine every hour. I could not stand against the ship's roll, so I stayed abed in my coffin, vomiting into a sack though my guts were vacant & shivering with an icy, scalding fever. My Ailment could no longer be concealed from the crew & my coffin was placed under quarantine. Goose had told Cpt. Molyneux that my Parasite was contagious, thereby appearing

the very paragon of selfless courage. (The complicity of Cpt. Molyneux & Boerhaave in the subsequent malfeasance cannot be proven or disproven. Boerhaave wished evil on me, but I am forced to admit it unlikely he was party to the crime described below.)

I recall surfacing from feverish shallows. Goose was an inch away. His voice sank to a loving whisper. "Dearest Ewing, your Worm is in its death throes & expelling every last drop of its poison! You must drink this purgative to expel its calcified remains. It will send you to sleep, but when you awake, the Worm that has so tormented you shall be out! The end of your suffering is at hand. Open your mouth, one last time, handsomely does it, dearest of fellows … here, 'tis bitter & foul a flavor, it's the myrrh, but down with it, for Tilda & Jackson …"

A glass touched my lips & Goose's hand cradled my head. I tried to thank him. The potion tasted of bilgewater & almond. Goose raised my head & stroked my Adam's apple until I swallowed the liquid. Time passed, I know not how long. The creaking of my bones & the ship's timbers were one.

Somebody knocked. Light softened my coffin's darkness & I heard Goose's voice from the corridor. "Yes, much, much better, Mr. Green! Yes, the worst is over. I was very worried, I confess, but Mr. Ewing's color is returning & his pulse strong. Only one hour? Excellent news. No, no, he's asleep now. Tell the captain we'll be going ashore tonight—if he could send word to arrange lodgings, I know Mr. Ewing's father-in-law will remember the kindness."

Goose's face floated into my vision again. "Adam?"

Another fist knocked at the door. Goose uttered an oath & swam away. I could no longer move my head but heard Autua demanding, "I see Missa Ewing!" Goose bade him begone, but the tenacious Indian was not to be faced down so easily. "No! Missa Green say he better! Missa Ewing save my life! He *my* duty!" Goose then told Autua this:—that I saw in Autua a carrier of disease & a rogue planning to exploit my present infirmity to rob me even of the buttons from my waistcoat. I had begged Goose, so he claimed, to "keep that d——d nigger away from me!" adding that I regretted ever saving his worthless neck. With that, Goose slammed & bolted my coffin door.

Why had Goose lied so? Why was he so determined no one else should see me? The answer raised the latch on a door of deception & an horrific truth kicked that same door in. To wit, the doctor was a poisoner & I his prey. Since the commencement of my "Treatment," the doctor had been killing me by degrees with his "cure."

My Worm? A fiction, implanted by the doctor's power of suggestion! Goose, a doctor? No, an itinerant, murdering confidence trickster!

I fought to rise, but the evil liquid my succubus had lately fed me had enfeebled my limbs so wholly I could not so much as twitch my extremities. I tried to shout for aid, but my lungs did not inflate. I heard Autua's footsteps retreat up the companionway & prayed for God to guide him back, but his intentions were otherwise. Goose clambered up the hawser to my bunk. He saw my eyes. Seeing my fear, the demon removed his mask.

"What's that you're saying, Ewing? How shall I comprehend if you drool & dribble so?" I emitted a frail whine. "Let me guess what you're trying to tell me—'Oh, Henry, we were friends, Henry, how could you *do* this to me?' [He mimicked my hoarse, dying whisper.] Am I on the nose?" Goose cut the key from my neck & spoke as he worked at uncovering my trunk. "Surgeons are a singular brotherhood, Adam. To us, people aren't sacred beings crafted in the Almighty's image, no, people are joints of meat; diseased, leathery meat, yes, but meat ready for the skewer & the spit." He mimicked my usual voice, very well. " 'But why *me,* Henry, are we not friends?' Well, Adam, even friends are made of meat. 'Tis absurdly simple. I need money & in your trunk, I am told, is an entire estate, so I have killed you for it. Where is the mystery? 'But, Henry, this is wicked!' But, Adam, the world *is* wicked. Maoris prey on

Moriori, Whites prey on darker-hued cousins, fleas prey on mice, cats prey on rats, Christians on infidels, first mates on cabin boys, Death on the Living. 'The weak are meat, the strong do eat.' "

Goose checked my eyes for sentience & kissed my lips. "Your turn to be eaten, dear Adam. You were no more gullible than any other of my patrons." My trunk lid swung open. Goose counted through my pocketbook, sneered, found the emerald from von Weiss & examined it through an eyepiece. He was unimpressed. The fiend untied the bundles of documents relating to the Busby estate & tore open the sealed envelopes in search of banknotes. I heard him count my modest supply He tapped my trunk for secret compartments, but he found none, for there are none. Lastly, he snipped the buttons from my waistcoat.

Goose addressed me through my delirium, as one might address an unsatisfactory tool. "Frankly, I am disappointed. I have known Irish navvies with more pounds to their name. Your cache scarcely covers my arsenick & opiate. If Mrs. Horrox had not donated her hoard of black pearls to my worthy cause, poor Goose's goose would be basted & cooked! Well, it is time for us to part. You will be dead within the hour & for me, 'tis hey, ho! for the open road."

My next cogent remembrance is of drowning in salt water so bright it hurt. Had Boerhaave found my body & thrown me overboard to ensure my silence & avoid tiresome procedures with the American consul? My mind was still active & as such might yet exercise some say in my destiny. Consent to drown, or attempt to swim? Drowning was by far the least troublesome option, so I cast about for a dying thought & settled on Tilda, waving off the *Belle-Hoxie* from Silvaplana Wharf so many months before with Jackson shouting, "Papa! Bring me back a kangaroo's paw!"

The thought of never more seeing them was so distressing, I elected to swim & found myself not in the sea but curled on deck, vomiting profusely & trembling violently with fever, aches, cramps, pinches. Autua was holding me (he had forced a bucketful of brine down me to "flush out" the poison). I retched & retched. Boerhaave shoved his way through the crowd of onlooking stevedores & seamen, snarling, "I told you once, nigger, that Yankee's no concern of yours! & if a direct order won't convince you—" Though the sun half-blinded me, I saw the first mate land one brutal kick in Autua's ribs & launch another. Autua gripped the atrabilious Hollander's shin in one firm hand whilst he gently lowered my head to the deck and rose up to his full height, taking his assailant's leg with him, robbing Boerhaave of his balance. The Dutchman fell on his head with a leonine roar. Autua now seized the other foot & slung our first mate over the bulwarks like a sack of cabbages.

Whether the crewmen were too fearful, astonished, or delighted to offer any resistance, I shall never know, but Autua carried me down a gangplank on the dockside unmolested. My reason informed me that Boerhaave could not be in heaven nor Autua in hell so we must be in Honolulu. From the harbor we passed down a thoroughfare bustling with innumerable tongues, hues, creeds & odors. My eyes met a Chinaman's as he rested beneath a carved dragon. A pair of women whose paint & tournure advertised their ancient calling peered at me & crossed themselves. I tried to tell them I was not yet dead, but they were gone. Autua's heart beat against my side, encouraging my own. Thrice he asked of strangers, "Where doctor, friend?" Thrice he was ignored (one answered, "No medicine for stinking Blacks!") before an old fish seller grunted directions to a sick house. I was parted from my senses for a time, before hearing the word *Infirmary*. Merely entering its fetid air, laden with ordure & decomposition, caused me to retch anew, notwithstanding my stomach was empty as a discarded glove. The buzzing of bluebottles hovered & a madman howled about Jesus adrift on the Sargasso Sea. Autua muttered to himself in his own tongue. "Patience more, Mr. Ewing—

this place smell death—I take you to Sisters."
How Autua's Sisters might have strayed so far from Chatham Isle was a puzzle I could not begin to solve, but I entrusted myself to his care. He quitted that charnel house & soon the taverns, dwellings, and warehouses thinned before giving way to sugar plantations. I knew I should ask, or warn, Autua about Goose, but speech was yet beyond my powers. Nauseous slumber tightened then loosened its grip on me. A distinct hill rose up & its name stirred in memory's sediment:—Diamond Head. The road hither was rocks, dust & holes, walled on both sides with unyielding vegetation. Autua's stride broke only once, to cup cool stream water to my lips, until we arrived at a Catholick mission, beyond the final fields. A nun tried to "shoo" us away with a broom, but Autua enjoined her, in Spanish as broken as his English, to grant his White charge sanctuary. Finally, one sister who evidently knew Autua arrived & persuaded the others that the savage was on a mission not of malice but of mercy.

By the third day I could sit up, feed myself, thank my guardian angels & Autua, the last free Moriori in this world, for my deliverance. Autua insists that had I not prevented him from being tossed overboard as a stowaway he could not have saved me & so, in a sense, it is not Autua who has preserved my life but myself. Be that as it may, no nursemaid ever ministered as tenderly as rope-roughened Autua has to my sundry needs these last ten days. Sister Véronique (of the broom) jests that my friend should be ordained & appointed hospital director.

Mentioning neither Henry Goose (or the poisoner who assumed that name) nor the saltwater bath which Autua gave Boer-haave, Cpt. Molyneux forwarded my effects via Bedford's agent, doubtless with one eye on the mischief my father-in-law may inflict on his future as a trader operating from San Francisco. Molyneux's other eye is on disassociating his reputation from that now-notorious murderer known as the Arsenick Goose. The devil has not yet been apprehended by the Port Constabulary nor, I suspect, shall that day ever come. In Honolulu's lawless hive, where vessels of all flags & nations arrive & depart daily, a man may change his name & history between entrée & dessert.

I am exhausted & must rest. Today is my thirty-fourth birthday.

I remain thankful to God for all his mercies.

Monday, 13th January—

Sitting under the candlenut tree in the courtyard is pleasant in the afternoon. Laced shadows, frangipani & coral hibiscus ward away the memory of recent evil. The sisters go about their duties, Sister Martinique tends her vegetables, the cats enact their feline comedies & tragedies. I am making acquaintances amongst the local avifauna. The *pallia* has a head & tail of burnished gold, the *akohekohe* is a handsome crested honeycreeper.

Over the wall is a poorhouse for foundlings, also administered by the sisters. I hear the children chanting their classes (just as my schoolmates and I used to before Mr. & Mrs. Channing's philanthropy elevated my prospects). After their studies are done, the children conduct their play in a beguiling babel. Sometimes, the more daring of their number brave the nuns' displeasure by scaling the wall & conduct a grand tour above the hospice garden by means of the candlenut's obliging branches. If the "coast is clear," the pioneers beckon their more timid playmates onto this human aviary & white faces, brown faces, *kandka* faces, Chinese faces, mulatto faces appear in the arboreal overworld. Some are Rafael's age & when I remember him a bile of remorse rises in my throat, but the orphans grin down at me, imitate

monkeys, poke out their tongues, or try to drop *kukui* nuts into the mouths of snoring convalescents & do not let me stay mournful for very long. They beg me for a cent or two. I toss up a coin for dextrous fingers to pluck, unerringly, from the air.

My recent adventures have made me quite the philosopher, especially at night, when I hear naught but the stream grinding boulders into pebbles through an unhurried eternity My thoughts flow thus. Scholars discern motions in history & formulate these motions into rules that govern the rises & falls of civilizations. My belief runs contrary, however. To wit: history admits no rules; only outcomes.

What precipitates outcomes? Vicious acts & virtuous acts.

What precipitates acts? Belief.

Belief is both prize & battlefield, within the mind & in the mind's mirror, the world. If we *believe* humanity is a ladder of tribes, a colosseum of confrontation, exploitation & bestiality, such a humanity is surely brought into being, & history's Horroxes, Boer-haaves & Gooses shall prevail. You & I, the moneyed, the privileged, the fortunate, shall not fare so badly in this world, provided our luck holds. What of it if our consciences itch? Why undermine the dominance of our race, our gunships, our heritage & our legacy? Why fight the "natural" (oh, weaselly word!) order of things?

Why? Because of this:—one fine day, a purely predatory world *shall* consume itself. Yes, the Devil shall take the hindmost until the foremost *is* the hindmost. In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction.

Is this the doom written within our nature?

If we *believe* that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, if we *believe* divers races & creeds can share this world as peaceably as the orphans share their candlenut tree, if we *believe* leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth & its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass. I am not deceived. It is the hardest of worlds to make real. Torturous advances won over generations can be lost by a single stroke of a myopic president's pen or a vainglorious general's sword.

A life spent shaping a world I *want* Jackson to inherit, not one I *fear* Jackson shall inherit, this strikes me as a life worth the living. Upon my return to San Francisco, I shall pledge myself to the Abolitionist cause, because I owe my life to a self-freed slave & because I must begin somewhere.

I hear my father-in-law's response: "Oho, fine, *Whiggish* sentiments, Adam. But don't tell *me* about justice! Ride to Tennessee on an ass & convince the rednecks that they are merely white-washed negroes & their negroes are black-washed Whites! Sail to the Old World, tell 'em their imperial slaves' rights are as inalienable as the Queen of Belgium's! Oh, you'll grow hoarse, poor & gray in caucuses! You'll be spat on, shot at, lynched, pacified with medals, spurned by backwoodsmen! Crucified! Naïve, dreaming Adam. He who would do battle with the many-headed hydra of human nature must pay a world of pain & his family must pay it along with him! & only as you gasp your dying breath shall you understand, your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean!" Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?

* Here my father's handwriting slips into spasmodic illegibility. —J.E.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Mitchell's first novel, *Ghostwritten,* was awarded the *Mail on Sunday/John* Llewellyn Rhys Prize for the best book by a writer under thirty-five, and was shortlisted for the *Guardian* First Book Award. His second novel, *Number9Dream,* followed in 2002 and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize as well as the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. In 2003, David Mitchell was selected as one of the Best of Young British Novelists by *Granta*. He also returned to Britain from Japan, where he spent eight years, and now lives in Ireland.

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